

THE GREAT TRIBULATION

Other books by David Chilton

*Productive Christians in an Age
of Guilt-Manipulators, 1981*

*Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology
of Dominion, 1985*

*The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of
the Book of Revelation, 1987*

*Power in the Blood: A Christian
Response to AIDS, 1987*

THE GREAT TRIBULATION

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PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

by Gary North

The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. The Lord shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies (Psalm 110:1-2).

Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. And the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death (I Corinthians 15:24-26).

The Bible teaches that Jesus shall reign over the earth. Once it begins, there will be no interruption of His earthly reign over this earth in history until death shall at last be conquered. But we know that death ends only on the final day, when Christ puts an end to Satan's final rebellion, when the devil is cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:7-10).

The key kingdom question is: When will His

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reign over earth begin? Jesus was very clear about this. He told His disciples after His resurrection:

All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen (Matthew 28:18-20).

So, all power in heaven *and in earth* has already been given to Christ. Already! We know also that He is reigning with God in heaven.

And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all (Ephesians 1:19-23).

Is Christ the head of the church today? Paul said that He is. But what else is also true today, according to Paul? The passage is clear: Jesus Christ now rules

the earth from heaven above. He is *presently* over all principality, power, might, and dominion. What are these? They are demonic spirits. Paul wrote in this same epistle: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12).

God is in control. Jesus is in control. All things are *in principle* under Jesus' feet. It is true that *in history*, evil beings still have power. We as Christ's people wrestle spiritually against them. The war between good and evil, between right and wrong, goes on daily in the life of every Christian and in the life of every society. But, *in principle*, life is stronger than death, for Jesus' resurrection has proven this. The resurrection is more powerful than the cross. Light is more powerful than darkness (John 1:9). Good is more powerful than evil, for Christ now reigns from on high. The legacy of the "second Adam," Jesus Christ, is more powerful *in history* than the legacy of the first Adam. Grace is more powerful than sin.

You believe this, don't you?

Why Fear a "Great Tribulation"?

Why, then, should Christians believe that some great tribulation faces them in the future—a tribulation so great that nothing like it in history has ever occurred? Not all Christians believe that they will go through the tribulation, although post-tribulation premillennialists do. But if God reigns from on high, why should Christians expect anything worse than the "normal" holocausts of the twentieth century—

the persecutions and genocides of Armenians, Jews, Russian kulaks, Ukrainians, and Cambodians? These were indeed terrible events, and there may well be more of them, but why should Christians expect that another event will occur that is fundamentally worse?

The answer is: they shouldn't. Why not? Because the great tribulation is behind us. This is what David Chilton argues in *The Great Tribulation*. Jesus warned His people of a great tribulation to come in the very near future. In the chapter on the great tribulation in Matthew, Christ's words are recorded: "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled" (Matthew 24:34). We know from the parallel passage in Luke that the great tribulation would be the destruction of Jerusalem by an army, which turned out to be the Roman army:

And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof draweth nigh. Then let them which are in Judea flee to the mountains; let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto. For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled (Luke 21:20-22).

David Chilton's magnificent commentary on the Book of Revelation is appropriately called *The Days of Vengeance* (Dominion Press, 1987). This little book is a brief survey of those sections of Revelation that

deal with the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Are You Looking Forward to Disaster?

It may sound strange to many readers that the great tribulation is behind us. This view has been quite common throughout church history, but over the last hundred years or so, many Bible-believing groups have adopted a different view: that the great tribulation will happen to Israel (or to everyone, including Christians) in the future, and probably in the near future. Most dispensationalists believe that the church will be "raptured" out of the world before the great tribulation takes place; post-tribulation dispensationalists and traditional non-dispensational premillennialists believe that the church will go through the great tribulation.

What the Bible teaches is that it took place in A.D. 70, and Christians did not go through it.

This book introduces readers to the theology of judgment: specifically, God's judgment sanctions against Israel. The sanctions were curses. God gave blessings to the church and cursings to rebellious Israel, which had crucified the Lord and publicly called God's judgment down on themselves: "Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children" (Matthew 27:25). God's cursings on ancient Israel in A.D. 70 matched their crime, the crucifixion of Christ. This crime was the greatest (worst) in history; their punishment was also the greatest (worst) in history. To call anything else "the great tribulation" is to downplay the immensity of that generation's crime.

Our Comprehensive Responsibility

I realize that this will disappoint many Christians. If the great tribulation is over, then the Rapture is not scheduled to take place prior to this tribulation. The rapture of the saints—the resurrection of dead saints and the instant transformation of those still alive on earth (I Corinthians 15:52)—gets delayed until the final act of history, when Satan rebels and Christ comes back to judge the world (Revelation 20:7-10). This means that until then, Christians will remain on earth as God's delegated agents of judgment in history, preaching the gospel, applying God's law to every area of life, and progressively subduing the earth to the glory of God (Genesis 1:26-28). This means that *there will be no earthly escape for church members from the progressively heavy responsibilities of exercising dominion.*

Sadly, there are millions of Christians today who have adopted a philosophy of the future that teaches that most people will die and go to hell—and then be tossed into the lake of fire for all eternity (Revelation 20:14)—and nothing the church can do will be able to overcome their resistance to the gospel. The Holy Spirit will simply never change the hearts of a majority of mankind. They will inevitably perish. With over 5 billion people alive today, and with billions more to be born in the next 40 years, this is a pessimistic doctrine of the future. Yet today's Christians prefer to believe in this horrible scenario than to believe in the growth of the church and the triumph of the gospel, for such a triumph would place tremendous responsibility on those who call themselves Christians. They really would rather see billions of

people perish eternally than to admit to themselves that they, as Christians, will be called on by God to take responsibility in this world—in the areas that many Christians call “secular”—because of a worldwide revival.

We who call ourselves Christian Reconstructionists proclaim a future worldwide revival and the steady, voluntary submission of people to God's law. We believe that Christians will steadily *be given* responsibilities in every area of life in a world that has run out of workable answers. God will give us these responsibilities, but not through revolution or tyranny. Instead, He will give us these responsibilities in history through the voluntary submission of those who have no other hope, and who (until that final rebellion of Revelation 20) will be willing to allow Christians to bear these social, political, military, and economic responsibilities.

We believe in revival. We believe in evangelism and foreign missions. So do all Christians. But we Reconstructionists have this unique outlook: *we believe that these gospel efforts will be successful in history*. When we call other Christians to intensify their efforts to spread the gospel, we offer them this unique motivation: their efforts will eventually prove successful in history. The gospel of Jesus Christ will not prove to be a failure in history. The power of the resurrection is greater than the power of the devil and his human followers to resist the most powerful message in man's history: that Jesus Christ has borne the sins of man, and that evil has in principle been overcome. As time goes on, this gospel will triumph in history.

Mankind's New Beginning

It is one of those oddities of recent intellectual history that perhaps the most succinct and perceptive comment on the Christian view of history is provided by a secular Jew who teaches law at Harvard University. In the Introduction to his book, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, published by Harvard University Press in 1983, Harold J. Berman makes a crucial observation on the centrality of the resurrection in Christian historical thought. He begins with an important insight into the Hebrew attitude toward historical time:

In contrast to the other Indo-European peoples, including the Greeks, who believed that time moved in ever recurring cycles, the Hebrew people conceived of time as continuous, irreversible, and historical, leading to ultimate redemption at the end. They also believed, however, that time has periods within it. It is not cyclical but may be interrupted or accelerated. It develops. The Old Testament is a story not merely of change but of development, of growth, of movement toward the messianic age—very uneven movement, to be sure, with much backsliding but nevertheless a movement *toward*.

Berman then goes on to explain how Christianity adopted this view of linear time, but added a key new element:

Christianity, however, added an important element to the Judaic concept of time: that of transformation of the old into the new. The Hebrew Bible became the Old Testament, its meaning transformed by its fulfillment in the New Testament. In the story of the Resurrection, death was transformed into a new beginning. The times were not only accelerated but regenerated. This introduced a new structure of history, in which there was a fundamental transformation of one age into another. This transformation, it was believed, could only happen once: the life, death, and resurrection of Christ was thought to be the only major interruption in the course of linear time from the creation of the world until it ends altogether (pp. 26-27).

The Great Tribulation shows that this transformation of the old order into Christ's new order was decisively manifested in the public termination of the old order: the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple and its sacrificial system. This was the shaking of the foundations in history.

Modern Christians are almost totally unfamiliar with the events of A.D. 70. The eschatological viewpoints that predict the great tribulation in the future led to the neglect in popular Christian literature of the story of the fall of Jerusalem. David Chilton has performed a major educational service to the church of Jesus Christ in reminding us what a momentous event the fall of Jerusalem was. From the fall of

Jerusalem until the future conversion of the Jews (Romans 11), which will inaugurate a period of unprecedented earthly blessings (vv. 12-15), nothing else comes close as a public manifestation of Christ's new order.

What we need to understand is that Satan is a great imitator. God defeated him at Calvary, but he still seeks to defeat Christians in their lives. God imposed a great tribulation on the old order of the apostate Hebrews, but Satan imitates God by imposing holocausts on mankind through his followers. Christ inaugurated a new world order, and so Satan's followers now promise to bring us a new world order. The Marxists do, the Nazis did, and the New Age movement does. It is all a counterfeit. Accept no substitutes! Remember Christ's words: "But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come unto you" (Matthew 12:28). He cast out devils by the Spirit of God, so the kingdom of God had come to them. It is now our inheritance as members of Christ's new nation, the church, for He told the Jews of His day: "The kingdom of God shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matthew 21:43). Christ's new world order has come, and the fall of Jerusalem is proof. As Berman says of the resurrection: "This introduced a new structure of history, in which there was a fundamental transformation of one age into another. This transformation, it was believed, could only happen once: the life, death, and resurrection of Christ was thought to be the only major interruption in the course of linear time from the creation of the world until it ends altogether." The worst is over!

1

THE TERMINAL GENERATION

One of the most basic principles for an accurate understanding of the Bible's message is that *Scripture interprets Scripture*. The Bible is God's holy, infallible, inerrant Word. It is our highest authority. This means that we cannot seek for an authoritative interpretation of Scripture's meaning anywhere outside of the Bible itself. It also means that we must not interpret the Bible as if it dropped out of the sky in the twentieth century. The New Testament was written in the first century, and so we must try to understand it in terms of its first-century readers. For example, when John called Jesus "the Lamb of God," neither he nor his hearers had in mind anything remotely similar to what the average, modern man-on-the-street might think of if he heard someone called a "lamb." John did not mean Jesus was sweet, cuddly, nice, or cute. In fact, John wasn't referring to Jesus' "personality" at all. He meant that Jesus was the sinless Sacrifice for the world. How do we know this? *Because the Bible tells us so.*

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This is the method we must use in solving every problem of interpretation in the Bible—including the prophetic passages. That is to say, when we read a chapter in Ezekiel, our first reaction must not be to scan the pages of the *New York Times* in a frantic search for clues to its meaning. The newspaper does not interpret Scripture, in any primary sense. The newspaper should not decide for us *when* certain prophetic events are to be fulfilled. Scripture interprets Scripture.

This Generation

In Matthew 24 (and Mark 13 and Luke 21) Jesus spoke to His disciples about a “Great Tribulation” which would come upon Jerusalem. It has become fashionable over the past 100 years or so to teach that He was speaking about the “end of the world” and the time of His Second Coming. But is this what He meant? We should note carefully that Jesus Himself gave the (approximate) date of the coming Tribulation, leaving no room for doubt after any careful examination of the Biblical text. He said:

Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place (Matthew 24:34).

This means that *everything* Jesus spoke of in this passage, at least up to verse 34, *took place before the generation then living passed away*. “Wait a minute,” you say. “Everything? The witnessing to all nations, the Tribulation, the coming of Christ on the clouds, the

stars falling . . . *everything?*” Yes—and, incidentally, this point is a very good test of your commitment to the principle we began with in this chapter.

Scripture interprets Scripture, I said; and you nodded your head and yawned, thinking: “Sure, I know all that. Get to the point. Where do the atomic blasts and killer bees come in?” The Lord Jesus declared that “*this generation*”—people *then living*—would not pass away before the things He prophesied took place. The question is, do you believe Him?

Some have sought to get around the force of this text by saying that the word *generation* here really means *race*, and that Jesus was simply saying that the Jewish race would not die out until all these things took place. Is that true? I challenge you: Get out your concordance and look up every New Testament occurrence of the word *generation* (in Greek, *genea*) and see if it *ever* means “race” in any other context. Here are all the references for the Gospels: Matthew 1:17; 11:16; 12:39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36; 24:34; Mark 8:12, 38; 9:19; 13:30; Luke 1:48, 50; 7:31; 9:41; 11:29, 30, 31, 32, 50, 51; 16:8; 17:25; 21:32. *Not one* of these references is speaking of the entire Jewish race over thousands of years; *all* use the word in its normal sense of *the sum total of those living at the same time*. It always refers to *contemporaries*. (In fact, those who say it means “race” tend to acknowledge this fact, but explain that the word suddenly *changes* its meaning when Jesus uses it in Matthew 24! We can smile at such a transparent error, but we should also remember that this is very serious. We are dealing with the Word of the living God.)

The conclusion, therefore—before we even begin to investigate the passage as a whole—is that *the events prophesied in Matthew 24 took place within the lifetime of the generation which was then living*. It was *this* generation which Jesus called “wicked and perverse” (Matthew 12:39, 45; 16:4; 17:17); it was *this* “terminal generation” which crucified the Lord; and it was *this* generation, Jesus said, upon which would come the punishment for “all the righteous blood shed on the earth” (Matthew 23:35).

All These Things

Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! (Matthew 23:36-38).

Jesus’ statement in Matthew 23 sets the stage for His teaching in Matthew 24. Jesus clearly told of an imminent judgment on Israel for rejecting the Word of God, and for the final apostasy of rejecting God’s Son. The disciples were so upset by His prophecy of doom upon the present generation and the “desolation” of the Jewish “house” (the Temple) that, when they were alone with Him, they could not help but ask for an explanation.

And Jesus came out of the Temple and was going away when His disciples came up to

point out the Temple buildings to Him. And He said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down." And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:1-3).

Again, we must take careful note that *Jesus was not speaking of something that would happen thousands of years later, to some future temple*. He was prophesying about "all *these things*," saying that "not one stone *here* shall be left upon another." This becomes even clearer if we consult the parallel passages:

And as He was going out of the Temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see *these great buildings*? Not one stone shall be left upon another which will not be torn down" (Mark 13:1-2).

And while some were talking about the Temple, that it was adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts, He said, "*As for these things which you are looking at*, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down" (Luke 21:5-6).

The only possible interpretation of Jesus' words which He Himself allows, therefore, is that He was speaking of the destruction of the Temple which *then* stood in Jerusalem, the very buildings which the disciples beheld at that moment in history. The Temple of which Jesus spoke was destroyed in the fall of Jerusalem to the Roman armies in A.D. 70. This is the only possible interpretation of Jesus' prophecy in this chapter. *The Great Tribulation ended with the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.* Even in the (unlikely) event that another temple should be built sometime in the future, Jesus' words in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 have nothing to say about it. He was talking solely about the Temple of that generation. There is no Scriptural basis for asserting that any other temple is meant. Jesus confirmed His disciples' fears: Jerusalem's beautiful Temple would be destroyed within that generation; her house would be left desolate.

The disciples understood the significance of this. They knew that Christ's coming in judgment to destroy the Temple would mean the utter dissolution of Israel as the covenant nation. It would be the sign that God had divorced Israel, removing Himself from her midst, taking the kingdom from her and giving it to another nation (Matthew 21:43). It would signal the end of the age, and the coming of an entirely new era in world history — *the New World Order*. From the beginning of creation until A.D. 70, the world was organized around one central Sanctuary, one single House of God. Now, in the New Covenant order, sanctuaries are established wher-

ever true worship exists, where the sacraments are observed and Christ's special Presence is manifested. Earlier in His ministry Jesus had said: "An hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father. . . . But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in Spirit and truth" (John 4:21-23). Now Jesus was making it clear that the new age was about to be permanently established upon the ashes of the old. The disciples urgently asked: "When will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?"

Some have attempted to read this as two or three entirely separate questions, so that the disciples would be asking *first* about the destruction of the Temple, and *then* about the signs of the end of the world. This hardly seems credible. The concern of the immediate context (Jesus' recent sermon) is on the fate of *this* generation. The disciples, in consternation, had pointed out the beauties of the Temple, as if to argue that such a magnificent spectacle should not be ruined; they had just been silenced with Jesus' categorical declaration that not one stone there would be left upon another. There is nothing whatsoever to indicate that they should suddenly change subjects and ask about the end of the material universe. (The translation "end of the world" in the King James Version is misleading, for the meaning of the English word *world* has changed in the last few centuries. The Greek word here is not *cosmos* [*world*], but *aion*, meaning *eon* or *age*.) The disciples had *one* concern, and their questions revolved around

one single issue: the fact that their own generation would witness the close of the pre-Christian era and the coming of the new age promised by the prophets. All they wanted to know was *when* it would come, and *what signs* they should look for, in order to be fully prepared.

Signs of the End

Jesus responded by giving the disciples not one, but *seven* signs of the end. (We must remember that “the end” in this passage is *not* the end of the world, but rather *the end of the age*, the end of the Temple, the sacrificial system, the covenant nation of Israel, and the last remnants of the pre-Christian era). It is notable that there is a progression in this list: the signs seem to become more specific and pronounced until we reach the final, immediate precursor of the end. The list begins with certain events which would occur merely as “the beginning of birth pangs” (Matthew 24:8). In themselves, Jesus warned, they were not to be taken as signals of an imminent end; thus the disciples should guard against being misled on this point (v. 4). These “beginning” events, marking the period between Christ’s resurrection and the Temple’s destruction in A.D. 70, were as follows:

1. *False Messiahs*. “For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will mislead many” (v. 5).

2. *Wars*. “And you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that

is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (vv. 6-7a).

3. *Natural disasters*. "And in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs" (vv. 7b-8).

Any one of these occurrences might have caused Christians to feel that the end was immediately upon them, had not Jesus warned them that such events were merely *general tendencies* characterizing the final generation, and not precise signs of the end. The next two signs, while they still characterize the period as a whole, do bring us up to a point near the end of the age:

4. *Persecution*. "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name" (v. 9).

5. *Apostasy*. "And at that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved" (vv. 10-13).

The last two items on the list are much more specific and identifiable than the preceding signs. These would be the final, definitive signs of the end—one

the fulfillment of a process, and the other a decisive event:

6. *Worldwide evangelization.* "And this Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come" (v. 14).

At first glance, this seems incredible. Could the Gospel have been preached to the whole world within a generation of these words? The testimony of Scripture is clear. Not only *could* it have happened, but *it actually did*. Proof? A few years before the destruction of Jerusalem, Paul wrote to Christians in Colossae of "the Gospel which has come to you, just as *in all the world also* it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing" (Colossians 1:5-6), and exhorted them not to depart "from the hope of the Gospel that you have heard, *which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven*" (Colossians 1:23). To the church at Rome, Paul announced that "your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world" (Romans 1:8), for the voice of Gospel preachers "has gone out into all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world" (Romans 10:18). According to the infallible Word of God, the Gospel was indeed preached to the whole world, well before Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70. This crucial sign of the end was fulfilled, as Jesus had said. All that was left was the seventh, final sign; and when this event occurred, any Christians remaining in or near Jerusalem were instructed to escape at once:

7. *The Abomination of Desolation.* "Therefore when you see the Abomination of Desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down to get the things out that are in his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to get his cloak" (vv. 15-18).

The Old Testament text Christ referred to is in Daniel 9:26-27, which prophesies the coming of armies to destroy Jerusalem and the Temple: "The people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And its end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war; *desolations* are determined. . . . And on the wing of *abominations* will come one who makes *desolate*, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out upon the *desolate*." The Hebrew word for *abomination* is used throughout the Old Testament to indicate *idols* and *filthy, idolatrous practices*, especially of the enemies of Israel (e.g., Deuteronomy 29:17; I Kings 11:5, 7; II Kings 23:13; II Chronicles 15:8; Isaiah 66:3; Jeremiah 4:1; 7:30; 13:27; 32:34; Ezekiel 5:11; 7:20; 11:18, 21; 20:7-8, 30). The meaning of both Daniel and Matthew is made clear by the parallel reference in Luke. Instead of "abomination of desolation," Luke reads:

But when you see *Jerusalem surrounded by armies*, then recognize that her *desolation* is at

hand. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are in the midst of the city depart, and let not those who are in the country enter the city; because these are the days of vengeance, in order that all things which are written may be fulfilled (Luke 21:20-22).

The "abomination of desolation," therefore, was to be *the armed invasion of Jerusalem*. During the period of the Jewish Wars, Jerusalem was surrounded by heathen armies several times. But the specific event denoted by Jesus as "the abomination of desolation" seems to be the occasion when the Edomites (Idumeans), the age-long enemies of Israel, attacked Jerusalem. Several times in Israel's history, as she was being attacked by her heathen enemies, the Edomites had broken in to ravage and desolate the city, thus adding greatly to Israel's misery (II Chronicles 20:2; 28:17; Psalm 137:7; Ezekiel 35:5-15; Amos 1:9, 11; Obadiah 10-16).

The Edomites remained true to form, and their characteristic pattern was repeated during the Great Tribulation. One evening in A.D. 68 the Edomites surrounded the holy city with 20,000 soldiers. As they lay outside the wall, according to Josephus, "there broke out a prodigious storm in the night, with the utmost violence, and very strong winds, with the largest showers of rain, with continual lightnings, terrible thunderings, and amazing concussions and bellowings of the earth, that was in an earthquake. These things were a manifest indication that some destruction was coming upon men, when

the system of the world was put into this disorder; and any one would guess that these wonders foreshowed some grand calamities that were coming." This was the last opportunity to escape from the doomed city of Jerusalem.

Anyone who wished to flee had to do so immediately, without delay. The Edomites broke into the city and went directly to the Temple, where they slaughtered 8,500 people by slitting their throats. As the Temple overflowed with blood, the Edomites rushed madly through the city streets, plundering houses and murdering everyone they met, including the high priest. According to the historian Josephus, this event marked "the beginning of the destruction of the city . . . from this very day may be dated the overthrow of her wall, and the ruin of her affairs."

The Great Tribulation

But woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days! But pray that your flight may not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath; for then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall (Matthew 24:19-21).

Luke's account gives additional details:

Woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days; for there will be great distress upon the land, and wrath to this people, and they will fall by the edge of

the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled (Luke 21:23-24).

As Christ pointed out in Matthew, the Great Tribulation was to take place, not at the *end* of history, but in the *middle*, for nothing similar had occurred "from the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall." Thus the prophecy of the Tribulation refers to the destruction of the Temple in that generation (A.D. 70) *alone*. It cannot be made to fit into some "double-fulfillment" scheme of interpretation; the Great Tribulation of A.D. 70 was an absolutely unique event, never to be repeated.

Josephus has left us an eyewitness record of much of the horror of those years, and especially of the final days in Jerusalem. It was a time when "the day-time was spent in the shedding of blood, and the night in fear"; when it was "common to see cities filled with dead bodies"; when Jews panicked and began indiscriminately killing each other; when fathers tearfully slaughtered their entire families, in order to prevent them from receiving worse treatment from the Romans; when, in the midst of terrible famine, mothers killed, roasted, and ate their own children (cf. Deuteronomy 28:53); when the whole land "was all over filled with fire and blood"; when the lakes and seas turned red, dead bodies floating everywhere, littering the shores, bloating in the sun, rotting and splitting apart; when the Roman soldiers captured people attempting to escape and

then crucified them — at the rate of 500 per day.

“Let Him be crucified! Let Him be crucified! *His blood be on us, and on our children!*” the apostates had cried forty years earlier (Matthew 27:22-25); and when it was all over, more than a million Jews had been killed in the siege of Jerusalem; close to a million more were sold into slavery throughout the empire, and the whole of Judea lay smoldering in ruins, virtually depopulated. The Days of Vengeance had come with horrifying, unpitiful intensity. In breaking her covenant, the holy city had become the Babylonish whore; and now she was a desert, “the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird” (Revelation 18:2).

2

COMING ON THE CLOUDS

We have seen that Christ's discourse on the Mount of Olives, recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, deals with "the end"—not of the world, but of Jerusalem and the Temple; it has exclusive reference to the "last days" of the Old Covenant era. Jesus clearly spoke of *His own contemporaries* when He said that "this generation" would see "all these things." The "Great Tribulation" took place during the terrible time of suffering, warfare, famine, and mass murder leading up to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. What appears to pose a problem for this interpretation, however, is what Jesus says next:

But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and all of the tribes of the land will mourn, and they will see the

Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the heaven to the other (Matthew 24:29-31).

Jesus seems to be saying that the Second Coming will occur immediately after the Tribulation. Did the Second Coming occur in A.D. 70? Have we missed it? First, let us be clear about one thing at the outset: there is just no getting around that word *immediately*. It means *immediately*. Acknowledging that the tribulation took place during the then-living generation, we must also face the clear teaching of Scripture that whatever Jesus is talking about in these verses happened *immediately* afterward. In other words, these verses describe what is to take place *at the end* of the Tribulation — what forms its climax.

In order to understand the meaning of Jesus' expressions in this passage, we need to understand the Old Testament much more than most people do today. Jesus was speaking to an audience that was intimately familiar with the most obscure details of Old Testament literature. They had heard the Old Testament read and expounded countless times throughout their lives, and had memorized lengthy passages. Biblical imagery and forms of expression had formed their culture, environment, and vocabulary from earliest infancy, and this had been true for generations.

The fact is that when Jesus spoke to His disciples about the fall of Jerusalem, *He used prophetic vocabu-*

lary. There was a “language” of prophecy, instantly recognizable to those familiar with the Old Testament. As Jesus foretold the complete end of the Old Covenant system — which was, in a sense, the end of a whole world — He spoke of it as any of the prophets would have, in the stirring language of covenantal judgment. We will consider each element in the prophecy, seeing how its previous use in the Old Testament prophets determined its meaning in the context of Jesus’ discourse on the fall of Jerusalem. Remember that our ultimate standard of truth is the Bible, and the Bible alone.

The Sun, Moon, and Stars

At the end of the Tribulation, Jesus said, the universe will collapse: the light of the sun and the moon will be extinguished, the stars will fall, the powers of the heavens will be shaken. The basis for this symbolism is in Genesis 1:14-16, where the sun, moon, and stars (“the powers of the heavens”) are spoken of as “signs” which “govern” the world. Later in Scripture, these heavenly lights are used to speak of earthly authorities and governors; and when God threatens to come against them in judgment, the same collapsing-universe terminology is used to describe it. Prophesying the fall of Babylon to the Medes in 539 B.C., Isaiah wrote:

Behold, the Day of the LORD is coming,
 Cruel, with fury and burning anger,
 To make the land a desolation;
 And He will exterminate its sinners from it.

For the stars of heaven and their constellations
 Will not flash forth with their light;
 The sun will be dark when it rises,
 And the moon will not shed its light
 (Isaiah 13:9-10).

Significantly, Isaiah later prophesied the fall of Edom in terms of *de-creation*:

And all the host of heaven will wear away,
 And the sky will be rolled up like a scroll;
 All their hosts will also wither away
 As a leaf withers from the vine,
 Or as one withers from the fig tree (Isaiah 34:4).

Isaiah's contemporary, the prophet Amos, foretold the doom of Samaria (722 B.C.) in much the same way:

"And it will come about in that day,"
 Declares the Lord God,
 "That I shall make the sun go down at noon
 And make the earth dark in broad daylight"
 (Amos 8:9).

Another example is from the prophet Ezekiel, who predicted the destruction of Egypt. God said this through Ezekiel:

"And when I extinguish you,
 I will cover the heavens, and darken their stars;
 I will cover the sun with a cloud,

And the moon shall not give its light.
 All the shining lights in the heavens
 I will darken over you
 And will set darkness on your land,"
 Declares the Lord God (Ezekiel 32:7-8).

It must be stressed that *none* of these events literally took place. God did not intend anyone to place a literalist construction on these statements. *Poetically*, however, all these things *did* happen: as far as these wicked nations were concerned, "the lights went out." This is simply figurative language, which would not surprise us at all if we were more familiar with the Bible and appreciative of its literary character.

What Jesus is saying in Matthew 24, therefore, in prophetic terminology immediately recognizable by his disciples, is that the light of Israel is going to be extinguished; the covenant nation will cease to exist. When the Tribulation is over, old Israel will be gone.

The Sign of the Son of Man

Most modern translations of Matthew 24:30 read something like this: "And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. . . ." That is a mistranslation, based not on the Greek text but on the translators' own misguided assumptions about the subject of this passage (thinking it is speaking about the Second Coming). A word-for-word rendering from the Greek actually reads:

And then will appear the sign of *the Son of Man in heaven*. . . .

As you can see, two important differences come to light in the correct translation: first, the location spoken of is *heaven*, not just the *sky*; second, it is not the *sign* which is in heaven, but *the Son of Man* who is in heaven. The point is simply that this great judgment upon Israel, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, will be the sign that *Jesus Christ is enthroned in heaven at the Father's right hand, ruling over the nations and bringing vengeance upon His enemies*. The divinely ordained cataclysm of A.D. 70 revealed that Christ had taken the Kingdom from Israel and given it to the Church; the desolation of the old Temple was the final sign that God had deserted it and was now dwelling in a new Temple, the Church. These were all aspects of the First Advent of Christ, crucial parts of the work He came to accomplish by His death, resurrection, and ascension to the throne. This is why the Bible speaks of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Church and the destruction of Israel as being *the same event*, for they were intimately connected theologically. The prophet Joel foretold both the Day of Pentecost and the destruction of Jerusalem in one breath:

And it will come about after this
 That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh;
 And your sons and daughters will prophesy,
 Your old men will dream dreams,
 Your young men will see visions.
 And even on the male and female servants
 I will pour out My Spirit in those days.
 And I will display wonders in the heaven and
 on the earth:

Blood, fire, and pillars of smoke.
The sun will be turned into darkness
And the moon into blood,
Before the great and awesome Day of the LORD
comes.
And it will come about that whoever calls on
the name of the LORD
Will be delivered;
For on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem
There will be those who escape,
As the LORD has said,
Even among the survivors whom the LORD calls
(Joel 2:28-31).

As we will see in a later chapter, St. Peter's inspired interpretation of this text in Acts 2 determines the fact that Joel is speaking of the period from the initial outpouring of the Spirit to the destruction of Jerusalem, from Pentecost to Holocaust. It is enough for us to note here that the same language of judgment is used in this passage. The common dime-store interpretation that the "pillars of smoke" are mushroom clouds from nuclear explosions is a radical twisting of the text, and a complete misunderstanding of Biblical prophetic language. It would make just as much sense to say that the pillar of fire and smoke during the Exodus was the result of an atomic blast.

The Clouds of Heaven

That, appropriately, brings us to the next element in Jesus' prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction: "and then all the tribes of the land will mourn, and

they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." The word *tribes* here has primary reference to *the tribes of the land of Israel*; and the "mourning" is probably meant in two senses. First, they would mourn in sorrow over their suffering and the loss of their land; second, they would ultimately mourn in repentance for their sins, when they are converted from their apostasy (see Romans 11).

But how is it that they would see Christ coming on the clouds? This is an important symbol of God's power and glory, used throughout the Bible. For example, think of the "pillar of fire and cloud" through which God saved the Israelites and destroyed their enemies in the deliverance from Egypt (see Exodus 13:21-22; 14:19-31; 19:16-19). In fact, all through the Old Testament God was coming "on clouds," in salvation of His people and destruction of His enemies: "He makes the clouds His chariot; He walks upon the wings of the wind" (Psalm 104:3). When Isaiah prophesied of God's judgment on Egypt, he wrote: "Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud, and is about to come to Egypt; the idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence" (Isaiah 19:1). The prophet Nahum spoke similarly of God's destruction of Nineveh: "In whirlwind and storm is His way, and clouds are the dust beneath His feet" (Nahum 1:3). God's "coming on the clouds of heaven" is an almost commonplace Scriptural symbol for His presence, judgment, and salvation.

More than this, however, is the fact that Jesus is referring to a specific event connected with the de-

struction of Jerusalem and the end of the Old Covenant. He spoke of it again at His trial, when the High Priest asked Him if He was the Christ, and Jesus replied:

I AM; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven (Mark 14:62; cf. Matthew 26:64).

Obviously, Jesus was not referring to an event thousands of years in the future. He was speaking of something that His contemporaries—"this generation"—would see in their lifetime. The Bible tells us exactly when Jesus came with the clouds of heaven:

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight (Acts 1:9).

So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God (Mark 16:19).

It was this event, *the Ascension to the right hand of God*, which Daniel foresaw:

I kept looking in the night visions,
 And behold, with the clouds of heaven
 One like a Son of Man was coming,
 And He came up to the Ancient of Days
 And was presented before Him.
 And to Him was given dominion,

Glory and a Kingdom,
 That all the peoples, nations, and men of every
 language
 Might serve Him.
 His dominion is an everlasting dominion
 Which will not pass away;
 And His Kingdom is one
 Which will not be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).

The destruction of Jerusalem was the sign that the Son of Man, the Second Adam, was in heaven, ruling over the world and disposing it for His own purposes. At His ascension, He had come on the clouds of heaven to receive the Kingdom from His Father; the destruction of Jerusalem was the revelation of this fact. In Matthew 24, therefore, Jesus was not prophesying that He would literally come on the clouds in A.D. 70 (although it was *figuratively* true). His literal "coming on the clouds," in fulfillment of Daniel 7, took place in A.D. 30, at the beginning of the "terminal generation." But in A.D. 70 the tribes of Israel would see the destruction of the nation as the result of His having ascended to the throne of heaven, to receive His Kingdom.

The Gathering of the Elect

Finally, Jesus announced, the result of Jerusalem's destruction will be Christ's sending forth of his "angels" to gather the elect. Isn't this the Rapture? No. The word *angels* simply means *messengers* (cf. James 2:25), regardless of whether their origin is heavenly or earthly; it is the *context* which determines

whether these are heavenly creatures being spoken of. The word often means *preachers of the Gospel* (see Matthew 11:10; Luke 7:24; 9:52; Revelation 1-3). In context, there is every reason to assume that Jesus is speaking of the worldwide evangelism and conversion of the nations which will follow upon the destruction of Israel.

Christ's use of the word *gather* is significant in this regard. The word, literally, is a verb meaning *to synagogue*; the meaning is that with the destruction of the Temple and of the Old Covenant system, the Lord sends out His messengers to gather His elect people into His New Synagogue. Jesus is actually quoting from Moses, who had promised: "If your outcasts are at the ends of heaven, from there the LORD your God will *synagogue* you, and from there he will take you" (Deuteronomy 30:4, Septuagint). Neither text has anything to do with the Rapture; both are concerned with the restoration and establishment of God's House, the organized congregation of His covenant people. This becomes even more pointed when we remember what Jesus had said just before this discourse:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted *to synagogue* your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your House is being left to you desolate! (Matthew 23:37-38).

Because Jerusalem apostatised and refused to be synagogued under Christ, her Temple would be destroyed, and a New Synagogue and Temple would be formed: the Church. The New Temple was created, of course, on the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit came to indwell the Church. But the fact of the new Temple's existence would only be made obvious when the scaffolding of the Old Temple and the Old Covenant system was taken away. The Christian congregations immediately began calling themselves "synagogues" (that is the word used in James 2:2), while calling the Jewish gatherings "synagogues of Satan" (Revelation 2:9; 3:9). Yet they lived in anticipation of the Day of Judgment upon Jerusalem and the Old Temple, when the Church would be revealed as the true Temple and Synagogue of God. Because the Old Covenant system was "obsolete" and "ready to disappear" (Hebrews 8:13), the writer to the Hebrews urged them to have hope, "not forsaking the *synagogy* of ourselves together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25; cf. II Thessalonians 2:1-2).

The Old Testament promise that God would "synagogue" His people undergoes one major change in the New Testament. Instead of the simple form of the word, the term used by Jesus has the Greek preposition *epi* prefixed to it. This is a favorite New Covenant expression, which *intensifies* the original word. What Jesus is saying, therefore, is that the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 will reveal Him as

having come with clouds to receive His Kingdom;
and it will display His Church before the world as
the full, the true, the *super*-Synagogue.

3

THE COMING OF THE ANTICHRIST

According to Jesus' words in Matthew 24, one of the increasing characteristics of the age preceding the overthrow of Israel was to be *apostasy within the Christian Church*. This was mentioned earlier, but a more concentrated study at this point will shed much light on a number of related issues in the New Testament—issues which have often been misunderstood.

We generally think of the apostolic period as a time of tremendously explosive evangelism and Church growth, a "golden age" when astounding miracles took place every day. This common image is substantially correct, but it is flawed by one glaring omission. We tend to neglect the fact that the early Church was the scene of *the most dramatic outbreak of heresy in world history*.

The Great Apostasy

The Church began to be infiltrated by heresy fairly early in its development. Acts 15 records the meeting of the first Church Council, which was con-

vened in order to render an authoritative ruling on the issue of justification by faith (some teachers had been advocating the false doctrine that one must keep the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament in order to be justified). The problem did not die down, however; years later, the apostle Paul had to deal with it again, in his letter to the churches of Galatia. As St. Paul told them, this doctrinal aberration was no minor matter, but affected their very salvation: it was a "different gospel," an utter distortion of the truth, and amounted to a repudiation of Jesus Christ Himself. Using some of the most severe terminology of his career, Paul pronounced damnation upon the "false brethren" who taught the heresy (see Galatians 1:6-9; 2:5, 11-21; 3:1-3; 5:1-12).

St. Paul also foresaw that heresy would infect the churches of Asia Minor. Calling together the elders of Ephesus, he exhorted them to "be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock," because "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:28-30). Just as St. Paul predicted, false doctrine became an issue of enormous proportions in these churches. By the time the Book of Revelation was written, some of them had become almost completely ruined through the progress of heretical teachings and the resulting apostasy (Revelation 2:2, 6, 14-16, 20-24; 3:1-4, 15-18).

But the problem of heresy was not limited to any geographical or cultural area. It was widespread and

became an increasing subject of apostolic counsel and pastoral oversight as the age progressed. Some heretics taught that the final Resurrection had already taken place (II Timothy 2:18), while others claimed that resurrection was impossible (I Corinthians 15:12); some taught strange doctrines of asceticism and angel-worship (Colossians 2:8, 18-23; I Timothy 4:1-3), while others advocated all kinds of immorality and rebellion in the name of "liberty" (II Peter 2:1-3, 10-22; Jude 4, 8, 10-13, 16). Again and again the apostles found themselves issuing stern warnings against tolerating false teachers and "false apostles" (Romans 16:17-18; II Corinthians 11:3-4, 12-15; Philippians 3:18-19; I Timothy 1:3-7; II Timothy 4:2-5), for these had been the cause of massive departures from the faith, and the extent of apostasy was increasing as the era progressed (I Timothy 1:19-20; 6:20-21; II Timothy 2:16-18; 3:1-9, 13; 4:10, 14-16). One of the last letters of the New Testament, the Book of Hebrews, was written to an entire Christian community on the very brink of wholesale abandonment of Christianity. The Christian Church of the first generation was not only characterized by faith and miracles; it was also characterized by increasing lawlessness, rebellion, and heresy from within the Christian community itself—just as Jesus had foretold in Matthew 24.

The Antichrist

The Christians had a specific term for this apostasy. They called it *Antichrist*. Many popular writers have speculated about this term, usually failing to

regard its usage in Scripture. In the first place, consider a fact which will undoubtedly shock some people: *the word "Antichrist" never occurs in the Book of Revelation.* Not once. Yet the term is routinely used by Christian teachers as a synonym for "the Beast" of Revelation 13. Obviously, there is no question that the Beast is an enemy of Christ, and is thus "anti" Christ in that sense; my point, however, is that the term *Antichrist* is used in a very specific sense, and is essentially unrelated to the figure known as "the Beast" and "666."

A further error teaches that "the Antichrist" is a specific individual; connected to this is the notion that "he" is someone who will make his appearance toward the end of the world. Both of these ideas, like the first, are contradicted by the New Testament.

In fact, the *only* occurrences of the term *Antichrist* are in the following verses from the letters of the Apostle John:

Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that Antichrist is coming, even now many Antichrists have arisen; from this we know that it is the last hour.

They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it may be shown that they all are not of us. . . .

Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the Antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.

Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also. . . .

These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you (I John 2:18-19, 22-23, 26).

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God;

and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not from God; and this is the spirit of the Antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.

You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.

They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them.

We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error (I John 4:1-6).

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the Antichrist.

Watch yourselves, that we might not lose what we have accomplished, but that we may receive a full reward.

Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son.

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting;

for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds (II John 7-11).

The texts quoted above comprise all the Bible passages that mention the word *Antichrist*, and from them we can draw several important conclusions:

First, *the Christians had already been warned* about the coming of Antichrist (I John 2:18; 4:3).

Second, there was not just one, but "*many Antichrists*" (I John 2:18). The term *Antichrist*, therefore, cannot be simply a designation of one individual.

Third, Antichrist was *already working* as St. John wrote: "even now many Antichrists have arisen" (I John 2:18); "I have written to you concerning *those who are trying to deceive you*" (I John 2:26); "you have heard that it is coming, and *now it is already in the world*" (I John 4:3); "many deceivers have gone out into the world. . . . *This is the deceiver and the Antichrist*" (II John 7). Obviously, if the Antichrist was already present in the first century, he was not some figure who would arise at the end of the world.

Fourth, Antichrist was *a system of unbelief*, partic-

ularly *the heresy of denying the person and work of Jesus Christ*. Although the Antichrists apparently claimed to belong to the Father, they taught that Jesus was not the Christ (I John 2:22); in union with the false prophets (I John 4:1), they denied the Incarnation (I John 4:3; II John 7, 9); and they rejected apostolic doctrine (I John 4:6).

Fifth, the Antichrists had been members of the Christian Church, but had left the faith (I John 2:19). Now these apostates were attempting to deceive other Christians, in order to sway the Church as a whole away from Jesus Christ (I John 2:26; 4:1; II John 7, 10).

Putting all this together, we can see that *Antichrist* is a description of both *the system of apostasy* and *individual apostates*. In other words, Antichrist was the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy that a time of great apostasy would come, when "many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many" (Matthew 24:10-11). As John said, the Christians had been warned of the coming of Antichrist; and, sure enough, "many Antichrists" had arisen. For a time, they had believed the gospel; later they had forsaken the faith, and then went about trying to deceive others, either starting new cults or, more likely, seeking to draw Christians into Judaism—the false religion which claimed to worship the Father while denying the Son. When the doctrine of Antichrist is understood, it fits in perfectly with what the rest of the New Testament tells us about the age of the "terminal generation."

One of the Antichrists who afflicted the early Church was Cerinthus, the leader of a first-century Judaistic cult. Regarded by the Church Fathers as “the Arch-heretic,” and identified as one of the “false apostles” who opposed St. Paul, Cerinthus was a Jew who joined the Church and began drawing Christians away from the orthodox faith. He taught that a lesser deity, and not the true God, had created the world (holding, with the Gnostics, that God was much too “spiritual” to be concerned with material reality). Logically, this meant also a denial of the Incarnation, since God would not take to Himself a physical body and truly human personality. And Cerinthus was consistent: he declared that Jesus had merely been an ordinary man, not born of a virgin; that “the Christ” (a heavenly spirit) had descended upon the man Jesus at His baptism (enabling Him to perform miracles), but then left Him again at the crucifixion. Cerinthus also advocated a doctrine of justification by works—in particular, the absolute necessity of observing the ceremonial ordinances of the Old Covenant in order to be saved.

Furthermore, Cerinthus was apparently the first to teach that the Second Coming would usher in a literal reign of Christ in Jerusalem for a thousand years. Although this was contrary to the apostolic teaching of the Kingdom, Cerinthus claimed that an angel had revealed this doctrine to him (much as Joseph Smith, a 19th-century Antichrist, would later claim to receive angelic revelation).

The true apostles sternly opposed the Cerinthian heresy. St. Paul admonished the churches: “But even

though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed!" (Galatians 1:8), and went on in the same letter to refute the legalistic heresies held by Cerinthus. According to tradition, the Apostle John wrote his Gospel and his letters with Cerinthus especially in mind. (We are also told that as St. John entered the public bath-house he spotted this Antichrist ahead of him. The apostle immediately turned around and ran back out, crying: "Let us flee, lest the building fall down; for Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is inside!")

Returning to St. John's statements about the spirit of Antichrist, we should note that he stresses one further, very significant point: as Jesus foretold in Matthew 24, the coming of Antichrist is a sign of "the End": "Children, *it is the last hour*; and just as you heard that Antichrist is coming, even now many Antichrists have arisen; *from this we know that it is the last hour*" (I John 2:18). The connection people often make between the Antichrist and "the last days" is correct enough; but what is often missed is the fact that the expression *the last days*, and similar terms, are used in the Bible to refer, *not* to the end of the physical world, but to *the last days of the nation of Israel*, the "last days" which *ended with the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70*. This, too, will come to many as a surprise; but we must accept the clear teaching of Scripture. The New Testament authors unquestionably used "end-times" language when speaking of the period they were living in, before the fall of Jerusalem. As we have seen, the Apostle John said two

things on this point: first, that *Antichrist had already come*; and, second, that *the presence of the Antichrist was proof that he and his readers were living in "the last hour."* In one of his earlier letters, St. Paul had had to correct a mistaken impression regarding the coming judgment on Israel. False teachers had been frightening the believers by saying that the day of judgment was already upon them. St. Paul reminded the Christians of what he had explained before:

Let no one deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first. . . . (II Thesalonians 2:3).

By the end of the age, however, as John was writing his letters, the Great Apostasy — the spirit of Antichrist, of which the Lord had foretold — was a reality.

St. Jude, who wrote one of the very last New Testament books, leaves us in no doubt about this issue. Issuing strong condemnations of the heretics who had invaded the Church and were attempting to draw Christians away from the orthodox faith (Jude 1-16), he reminds his readers that they had been warned of this very thing:

But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, that they were saying to you, "*In the last time there shall be mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts.*" *These are the ones* who cause divisions, worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit (Jude 17-19).

St. Jude clearly regards the warnings about the “mockers” as referring to the heretics of his own day — meaning that his own day was the period of “the last time.” Like St. John, he knew that the rapid multiplying of these false brethren was a sign of the End. Antichrist had arrived, and it was now the Last Hour.

4

THE LAST DAYS

As we began to see in the preceding chapter, the period spoken of in the Bible as “the last days” (or “last times” or “last hour”) is *the period between Christ’s birth and the destruction of Jerusalem*. The early Church was living at the end of the old age and the beginning of the new. This whole period must be considered as the time of Christ’s First Advent. In both the Old and New Testaments, the promised destruction of Jerusalem is considered to be an aspect of the work of Christ, intimately connected to His work of redemption. His life, death, resurrection, ascension, outpouring of the Spirit, and judgment on Jerusalem are all parts of *His one work of bringing in His Kingdom and creating His new Temple* (see, for example, how Daniel 9:24-27 connects the atonement with the destruction of the Temple).

Let’s consider how the Bible itself uses these expressions about the end of the age. In I Timothy 4:1-3, St. Paul warned:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

Was St. Paul talking about "latter times" which would happen thousands of years later? Why should he warn Timothy of events which Timothy, and Timothy's great-great-grandchildren, and fifty or more *generations* of descendants, would never live to see? In fact, St. Paul tells Timothy, "If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ" (I Timothy 4:6). The members of Timothy's congregation needed to know about what would take place in the "latter days," because they would be personally affected by those events. In particular, they needed the assurance that the coming apostasy was part of the overall pattern of events leading up to the end of the old order and the full establishing of Christ's Kingdom. As we can see from passages such as Colossians 2:18-23, the "doctrines of demons" St. Paul warned of were current during the first century. The "latter times" were already taking place. This is quite clear in St. Paul's later statement to Timothy:

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come; for men will be lovers of them-

selves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. *And from such people turn away!* For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. Now as Janes and Jambres resisted Moses, *so also do these resist the truth*; men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith (II Timothy 3:1-8).

The very things St. Paul said would happen in "the last days" were happening as he wrote, and he was simply warning Timothy about what to expect as the age rushed on to its climax. Antichrist was beginning to rear its head.

Other New Testament writers shared this perspective with St. Paul. The letter to the Hebrews begins by saying that God "*has in these last days spoken to us in His Son*" (Hebrews 1:2); the writer goes on to show that "*now once at the end of the ages He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself*" (Hebrews 9:26). St. Peter wrote that Christ "*was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for you who through Him are believers in God*" (I Peter 1:20-21). Apostolic testimony is unmistakably clear: when Christ came,

the "last days" arrived with Him. He came to bring in the new age of the Kingdom of God. The old age was winding down, and would be thoroughly abolished when God destroyed the Temple.

From Pentecost to Holocaust

On the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit had been poured out and the Christian community spoke with other tongues, St. Peter declared the Biblical interpretation of the event:

This is that which was spoken of through the prophet Joel: "And it shall be *in the last days*," God says, "that I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy. I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and glorious Day of the Lord. And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:16-21).

We have already seen how the "blood and fire and vapor of smoke" and the signs in the sun and the moon were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem. What is crucial to notice at this point is St. Peter's

precise statement that *the last days had arrived*. Contrary to some modern expositions of this text, St. Peter did not say that the miracles of Pentecost were *like* what Joel prophesied, or that they were some sort of “*proto-fulfillments*” of Joel’s prophecy; he said that this was *the* fulfillment: “*This is that* which was spoken of through the prophet Joel.” The last days were here: the Spirit had been poured out, God’s people were prophesying and speaking in tongues, and Jerusalem would be destroyed with fire. The ancient prophecies were unfolding, and this generation would not pass until “all these things” were fulfilled. Therefore, St. Peter urged his listeners, “Be saved from this perverse generation!” (Acts 2:40).

In this connection, we should note *the eschatological significance of the gift of tongues*. St. Paul showed, in I Corinthians 14:21-22, that *the miracle of tongues was the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy against rebellious Israel*. Because the covenant people were rejecting His clear revelation, God warned that His prophets would speak to them with foreign tongues, for the express purpose of rendering a final witness to unbelieving Israel during the last days preceding her judgment:

Indeed, He will speak to this people
 Through stammering lips and a foreign
 tongue. . . .
 That they may go and stumble backward, and
 be broken
 And snared and taken captive.
 Therefore, hear the Word of the LORD, O
 scoffers,

Who rule this people who are in Jerusalem,
 Because you have said, "We have made a
 covenant with death,
 And with Sheol we have made a pact.
 When the overwhelming scourge passes through,
 It will not reach us,
 For we have made falsehood our refuge
 And we have concealed ourselves with
 deception."

Therefore, thus says the Lord God:
 "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested
 stone,
 A costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly
 placed;
 He who believes in it will not be in a hurry.
 And I will make justice the measuring line,
 And righteousness the level;
 Then hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies,
 And the waters shall overflow the secret place.
 And your covenant with death shall be canceled,
 And your pact with Sheol shall not stand;
 When the overwhelming scourge passes through,
 Then you become its trampling place.
 As often as it passes through, it will seize you.
 For morning after morning it will pass through,
 And by day and by night.
 And it will be sheer terror to understand what it
 means" (Isaiah 28:11-19).

The miracle of Pentecost was a shocking message to Israel. They knew what this meant. It was the sign from God that the Chief Cornerstone had come,

and that Israel had rejected Him to its own damnation (Matthew 21:42-44; I Peter 2:6-8). It was *the sign of judgment and reprobation*, the signal that the apostates of Jerusalem were about to “stumble backward, be broken, snared, and taken captive.” The Last Days of Israel had come: the old age was at an end, and Jerusalem would be swept away in a new flood, to make way for God’s New Creation. As St. Paul said, the gift of tongues was “for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers” (I Corinthians 14:22) — *a sign to the unbelieving Jews of their approaching doom.*

The early Church looked forward to the coming of the new age. They knew that, with the visible end of the Old Covenant system, the Church would be revealed as the new, true Temple; and the work Christ came to perform would be accomplished. This was an important aspect of redemption, and the first-generation Christians looked forward to this event *in their own lifetime.* During this period of waiting and severe trial, the Apostle Peter assured them that they were “protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (I Peter 1:5). They were on the very threshold of the new world.

Expecting the End

The Apostles and first-generation Christians knew they were living in the last days of the Old Covenant age. They looked forward anxiously to its consummation and the full ushering in of the new era. As the age progressed and the “signs of the end” increased and intensified, the Church could see that

the Day of Judgment was fast approaching; a crisis was looming in the near future, when Christ would deliver them "from this present evil age" (Galatians 1:4). The statements of the apostles are full of this expectant attitude, the certain knowledge that this momentous event was upon them. The sword of God's wrath was poised over Jerusalem, ready to strike at any time. But the Christians were not to be afraid, for the coming wrath was not aimed at them, but at the enemies of the Gospel. St. Paul urged the Thessalonians to "wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come" (I Thessalonians 1:10). Echoing Jesus' words in Matthew 23-24, St. Paul emphasized that the imminent judgment would be poured out upon "the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the uttermost" (I Thessalonians 2:14-16). The Christians had been forewarned and were therefore prepared, but unbelieving Israel would be caught off guard:

Now as to the times and epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like

birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. . . . For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (I Thessalonians 5:1-5, 9).

St. Paul expanded upon this in his second letter to the same church:

For after all it is a righteous thing for God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give relief to you who are troubled and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire dealing out vengeance to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed (II Thessalonians 1:6-10).

Clearly, St. Paul is not talking about Christ's final coming at the end of the world, for the coming "tribulation" and "vengeance" were specifically aimed at those who were persecuting the Thessalonian Christians of the first generation. The coming day of judgment was not something thousands of years

away. It was near—so near that they could see it coming. Most of the “signs of the end” were in existence already, and the inspired apostles encouraged the Church to expect the End at any moment. St. Paul urged the Christians in Rome to persevere in godly living, “knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand. Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Romans 13:11-12). As the old age had been characterized by sin, despair, and bondage to Satan, the new age would be increasingly characterized by righteousness and the universal reign of the Kingdom. For the period of the “last days” was also the time when the Kingdom of heaven was inaugurated on earth, when the “Holy Mountain” began its dynamic growth and all nations began to flow into the Christian faith, as the prophets foretold (see Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-4). Obviously, there is still a great deal of ungodliness in the world today. But Christianity has been gradually and steadily winning battles since the days of the early Church; and as Christians continue to make war on the enemy, the time will come when the saints possess the Kingdom (Daniel 7:22, 27).

This is why St. Paul could comfort believers by assuring them that “the Lord is at hand” (Philippians 4:5). Indeed, the watchword of the early Church (I Corinthians 16:22) was *Maranatha! The Lord comes!* Looking forward to the coming destruction of Jerusalem, the writer to the Hebrews warned those

tempted to "draw back" to apostate Judaism that apostasy would only bring them "a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries" (Hebrews 10:27).

For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, says the Lord." And again, "The Lord will judge His people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. . . . For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: "For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come, and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him." But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul (Hebrews 10:30-31, 36-39).

The other New Testament authors wrote in similar terms. After St. James warned the wealthy unbelievers who oppressed the Christians of the miseries about to descend upon them, charging that they had fraudulently "heaped up treasure in the last days" (James 5:1-6), he encouraged the suffering Christians:

Therefore be patient, brethren, *until the coming of the Lord*. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for *the coming of the Lord is at hand*. Do not grumble

against one another, brethren, lest you be judged. Behold, *the Judge is standing at the door!* (James 5:7-9).

The Apostle Peter, too, warned the Church that “the end of all things is at hand” (I Peter 4:7), and encouraged them to live in the daily expectation of the judgment that would come in their generation:

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. . . . For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? (I Peter 4:12-13, 17).

The early Christians had to endure both severe persecution at the hands of apostate Israel, and betrayal by Antichrists from their own midst who sought to steer the Church into the Judaistic cult. But this time of fiery tribulation and suffering was working for the Christians’ own blessing and sanctification (Romans 8:28-39); and in the meantime God’s wrath against the persecutors was building up. Finally, the End came, and God’s anger was unleashed. Those who had brought tribulation upon

the Church were cast into the greatest Tribulation of all time. The Church's greatest enemy was destroyed, and would never again pose a threat to her ultimate victory.

5

THE COMING OF THE NEW COVENANT

We have seen in the preceding chapters how the message of Jerusalem's approaching desolation is central to the concerns of the New Testament. The Book of Revelation is no exception to this. It specifically states, in the very first verse, that its concerns are not with the far distant future and the end of the world, but rather with "the things that must shortly take place." In the third verse its readers are warned that "the time is near" for its prophecies to be fulfilled. Both of these statements are repeated at the end of the book as well (see Revelation 22:6, 10). And its prophecies are clearly—though often in symbolic form—directed against "the Great City . . . where the Lord was crucified" (Revelation 11:8; cf. 14:8; 16:19; 17:18). Like the rest of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation follows Christ's example in foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

As I have explained at length in my commentary, *The Days of Vengeance*, St. John wrote Revelation in

the standard Biblical form of the "Covenant Lawsuit" delivered by the Hebrew prophets (God's "attorneys for the prosecution") against the disobedient nation of Israel. Through a myriad of symbols adapted from the Old Testament prophecies, St. John set forth two major points: first, Israel had irrevocably broken her Covenant with the Lord; second, by His incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ had brought in a new and final Covenant, infallibly guaranteed by His victory over sin and death.

The foundational image of this in the Book of Revelation is shown in the first vision of the Court of heaven (Chapters 4 and 5). St. John saw the Lord sitting on the Throne holding a Book that was "sealed with seven seals" (indicating to his audience that it was some sort of testament) and "written on the front and on the back." Any Christian reader of the first century would immediately have understood the significance of this, for it is based on the description of the Ten Commandments. The two tablets of the Testimony (which were duplicate copies of the Law) were inscribed on both front and back (Exodus 32:15).

An analogue of this is found in the suzerainty treaties of the Ancient Near East: a victorious king (the suzerain) would impose a treaty/covenant upon the conquered king (the vassal) and all those under the vassal's authority. Two copies of the treaty were drawn up (as in modern contracts), and each party would place his copy of the contract in the house of his god, as a legal document testifying to the transaction. In the case of Israel, of course, the LORD was

both Suzerain and God; so both copies of the covenant were placed in the Tabernacle (Exodus 25:16, 21; 40:20; Deuteronomy 10:2).

The idea of *Covenant* is thus central to the message of Revelation. St. John's prophecy is presented from the outset as part of the Canon of Holy Scripture, primarily written to be read in the liturgy (1:3). Tabernacle imagery is used in the opening Doxology (1:4-5), and the Church is declared to be constituted as the new Kingdom of priests, as Israel had been at Sinai (1:6). The theme of the book, stated in 1:7, is Christ's coming in the Glory-Cloud; then, almost immediately, St. John uses three words that almost always occur throughout the Bible in connection with covenant-making activity: *Spirit*, *Day*, and *Voice* (1:10). The following vision of Christ as the glorious High Priest (1:12-20) combines many images from the Old Testament—the Cloud, the Day of the LORD, the Angel of the LORD, the Creator and universal Sovereign, the Son of Man/Second Adam, the Conqueror of the nations, the Possessor of the Church—all of which are concerned with the prophecies of the coming of the New Covenant. The vision is followed by Christ's own message to the churches, styled as a recounting of the history of the Covenant (Chapters 2-3). Then, in Chapter 4, St. John sees the Throne, supported by the Cherubim and surrounded by the royal priesthood, all singing God's praises to the accompaniment of Sinai-like lightning and voices and thunder. We should not be surprised to find this magnificent array of covenant-making imagery culminating in the vision of a testament/

treaty document, written on front and back, in the hand of Him who sits on the Throne. *The Book is nothing less than the Testament of the resurrected and ascended Christ: the New Covenant.*

But the coming of the New Covenant implies the passing away of the Old Covenant, and the judgment of apostate Israel. As we have briefly noted, the Biblical prophets spoke in terms of the covenantal treaty structure, acting as prosecuting attorneys on behalf of the divine Suzerain, bringing covenant lawsuit against Israel. The imagery of the document inscribed on both sides is also used in the prophecy of Ezekiel, on which St. John has modeled his prophecy. Ezekiel tells of receiving a scroll containing a list of judgments against Israel:

Then He said to me, "Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to a rebellious people who have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day. . . ." Then I looked, behold, a hand was extended to me; and lo, a Book was in it. When He had spread it out before me, it was written on the front and back; and written on it were lamentations, mourning, and woe (Ezekiel 2:3-10).

As St. John sees the opening of the New Covenant, therefore, he will also see the curses of the Old Covenant fulfilled on the apostate covenant people. This conclusion becomes clearer as we look at the overall movement of the prophecy. The Seven Seals

of the Book are broken in order to reveal the Book's contents; but the breaking of the Seventh Seal initiates the sounding of the Seven Trumpets (8:1-2). The final vision of the Trumpets-section closes with a horrifying scene of a great Vintage, in which human "grapes of wrath" are trampled and the whole Land is flooded with a torrent of blood (14:19-20). This leads directly into the final section of Revelation, in which St. John sees the blood from the Winepress being poured out from the Seven Chalices of wrath (16:1-21). It would seem, therefore, that we are meant to understand the Seven Chalices as the content of the Seventh Trumpet, "the last Woe" to fall upon the Land (cf. 8:13; 9:12; 11:14-15; 12:12). All of these—Seals, Trumpets, and Chalices—are the contents of the seven-sealed Book, the New Covenant.

But there is a crisis: St. John finds that no one in all of creation—"in heaven, or on the earth, or under the earth"—is able or worthy to open the Book, or even to look into it. No one can fulfill the conditions required of the Mediator of the New Covenant. All previous mediators—Adam, Moses, David, and the rest—had ultimately proved inadequate for the task. No one could take away sin and death; for all have sinned, and continually fall short of the Glory of God (Romans 3:23). The sacrifice of animals could not really take away sins, for such a thing is *impossible* (Hebrews 10:4); and the high priest who offered up the sacrifices was a sinner himself, "beset with weakness" (Hebrews 5:1-3; 7:27) and having to be replaced after his death (Hebrews 7:23). No one could be found to guarantee a better covenant. With the pro-

phetic yearning and sadness of the Old Covenant Church, St. John began to weep greatly. The New Covenant had been offered by the One sitting on the Throne, but no one was worthy to act on behalf of both God and man to ratify the Covenant. The seven-sealed Book would remain locked.

Immediately, St. John is comforted by an Elder, who says (as it reads literally): "Stop weeping; behold, He has conquered!" The Church thus preaches the Gospel to St. John; and it seems as if the Elder is so excited about his message that he blurts out the climax before he even explains *who* has conquered. He goes on to describe Christ the Conqueror as *the Lion from the tribe of Judah*, the strong and powerful fulfillment of Jacob's ancient prophecy to his fourth son:

You are a lion's cub, O Judah;
 You return from the prey, my son.
 Like a lion he crouches and lies down,
 Like a lioness— who dares to rouse him?
 The scepter will not depart from Judah,
 Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
 Until He comes to whom it belongs,
 And the obedience of the nations is His
 (Genesis 49:9-10).

It was King David, the conquering Lion of Judah of the Old Covenant, to whom God revealed both the plan of the Temple (I Chronicles 28:11-19) and the plan of the everlasting covenant, the "Charter for Humanity" by which the coming Priest-King would bring the blessing of Abraham to all nations

(II Samuel 7:18-29; 23:2-5; I Chronicles 17:16-27; Psalm 16; 110; Acts 2:25-36). At last David's greater Son came and conquered, establishing everlasting dominion and opening the Covenant. Embodying and fulfilling all its promises, He is the One "to whom it belongs."

Christ is also called *the Root of David*—a strange expression, to our way of thinking. We can more easily understand Isaiah's term: "a shoot from the stem of Jesse" (Isaiah 11:1). As a descendant of Jesse and David, Jesus could be called a "branch" (Jeremiah 23:5; Zechariah 3:8); but how could He be called the Root? Our perplexity originates in our non-Biblical views of how history works. We are accustomed to thinking of history as if it were a cosmic Rube Goldberg machine: trip a lever at one end, and a series of domino-like thingamajigs and whatsits bang into each other, at long last producing a whatchamacallit at the far end of the machine. By pure cause and effect, each event causes other events, in direct chronological succession.

Now, this is true—but it is not the whole truth. In fact, taken alone and autonomously, it is not true at all, for such a thesis is evolutionary in its assumptions, rather than Biblical. History is not simply a matter of the past causing the future; it is also true that *the future causes the past!*

A simple illustration might help us understand this. Let's say someone finds you packing a sack lunch on a warm Saturday morning, and asks the reason for it. You answer, "Because I'm going to have a picnic at the park today." What has hap-

pened? In a sense, *the future*—the planned picnic—*has determined the past*. Because you wanted a picnic at the park, you *then* planned a lunch. Logically, the picnic preceded, and caused, the making of the lunch, even though it followed it chronologically. In the same way, God desired to glorify Himself in Jesus Christ; therefore He created Jesse and David, and all the other ancestors of Christ's human nature, in order to bring His Son into the world. The Root of David's very existence was the Son of David, Jesus Christ. The "effect" determined the "cause"!

The Lord Jesus Christ is thus presented in the most radical way possible as the Center of all history, the divine Root as well as the Branch, the Beginning and the End, Alpha and Omega. And it is as the conquering Lion and the determining Root that He has prevailed so as to open the Book—the New Covenant—and its seven seals. Interestingly, however, when St. John turns to see the One who is described in this way, he sees a *Lamb* standing before the Throne. The point of the text is not that Jesus is "lamblike" in the sense of being gentle, sweet, or mild. Christ is called a Lamb, not because He is "nice," but in view of His *work*. He is the Lamb that was slain, "who takes away the sin of the world" (Jonah 1:29). Thus, *the center of history is the finished, sacrificial work of Christ*. The foundation for His mediatorial kingship (Christ as the Lion) is His mediatorial atonement (Christ as the Lamb). It is because of His sacrifice that He has been exalted to the place of supreme rule and authority. Christ has attained victory through His redemptive suffering and death on our behalf.

This means that Christ's understanding of creation and history originates not from history itself but from the fact that He is both the Creator and Redeemer of the world. Thus, on the basis of His Person, His work, and His exalted position as Savior and World-Ruler, Jesus Christ ascended to heaven, stepped forward to the Throne of His Father, and took the New Covenant out of the right hand of Him who sat upon the Throne (Revelation 5:7). We have already noted how the prophet Daniel described it:

I kept looking in the night visions,
 And behold, with the clouds of heaven
 One like a Son of Man was coming,
 And He came up to the Ancient of Days
 And was presented before Him.
 And to Him was given dominion,
 Glory and a Kingdom,
 That all the peoples, nations, and men of every
 language
 Might serve Him.
 His dominion is an everlasting dominion
 Which will not pass away;
 And His Kingdom is one
 Which will not be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).

The central message of the Bible is salvation through Jesus Christ, the Mediator of the New Covenant. Apart from His work, through which He acquired and eternally possesses the Covenant, there is no hope for mankind. He has overwhelmingly conquered so as to open the Treaty of the Great King;

and through Him we too are more than conquerors.

In the closing verses of Revelation 5, St. John goes on to show the Church's response to all this in worship, praising God for the outcome of Christ's work. Their "New Song" exults in the fact that Christ has purchased His people out of the nations, not only to redeem them from sin, but to enable them to fulfill God's original Dominion Mandate for man. As the Second Adam, Christ sets before His New Creation the task Adam forfeited—this time, however, on the unshakable foundation of His death, resurrection, and ascension. Salvation has a purpose, a saving *to* as well as a saving *from*. Christ has made His people to be kings and priests to our God, and has guaranteed their destiny: "Thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth" (Revelation 10). This shows us the direction of history: the redeemed of the Lord, already a nation of kingly priests, are moving toward the complete dominion God had planned as His original program for man. In Adam it had been lost; Jesus Christ, the Second Adam, has redeemed us and restored us to our royal priesthood, so that we will reign upon the earth. *Through the work of Christ the definitive victory over Satan has been won.* We are promised increasing victories, and increasing rule and dominion, as we bring the Gospel and law of the great King to fruition throughout the world.

The Church in St. John's day was about to experience a time of severe testing and persecution. Already they were seeing what, in a sane age, could scarcely be imagined: a union between Israel and

the evil Beast of the pagan Roman Empire. These Christians needed to understand history as something not ruled by chance or evil men or even the devil, but ruled instead from God's Throne by Jesus Christ. They needed to see that Christ was reigning *now*, that He had already wrested the world from Satan's grasp, and that even now all things in heaven and earth were bound to acknowledge Him as King. They needed to see themselves in the true light: not as forgotten troops in a lonely outpost fighting a losing battle, but as kings and priests already, waging war and overcoming, predestined to victory, with the absolute assurance of conquest and dominion with the High King over the earth. They needed *the Biblical philosophy of history: that all of history, created and controlled by God's personal and total government, is moving inexorably toward the universal dominion of the Lord Jesus Christ*. The new and final age of history has arrived; the New Covenant has come. *Behold, He has conquered!*

6

THE FOUR HORSEMEN

We now come to consider the breaking of the seven Seals of the Book (six of the Seals are broken in Revelation 6; the seventh Seal is broken in 8:1, and is connected to the seven Trumpets). We have seen in the preceding chapter that the Book represents the treaty document of the New Covenant, the opening of which will result in the destruction of apostate Israel. What then does the breaking of the Seals represent? Some have thought this to signify a chronological reading through the Book, and that the events depicted are in a straight, historical order. This is unlikely for two reasons. First, the Seals seem to be on the *outside edge* of the Book (which is in the form of a scroll): one cannot really begin to read the Book until all the Seals are broken. The seventh Seal, consisting of a call to action by the blowing of the seven trumpets, actually opens the book so that we can read its contents.

Second, a careful reading of the events shown by each Seal reveals that they are not listed in chrono-

logical order. For example, in the Fifth Seal—after all the havoc wreaked by the Four Horsemen—the martyrs calling for judgment are told to wait. But the judgment is immediately poured out in the Sixth Seal, the entire creation “unseam’d from the nave to the chaps.” Yet, after all this, God commands the angels to withhold judgment until the servants of God are protected (7:3). Obviously, the Seals are not meant to represent a progressive chronology. It is more likely that they reveal the main ideas of the book’s contents, the major themes of the judgments that came upon Israel during the Last Days, between A.D. 30-70.

Several commentators have observed the close structural similarity between the six Seals of this chapter and the events of the so-called *Little Apocalypse*—Jesus’ discourse recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21—which, as we have already seen, foretells the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (see Chapters 1 and 2, above). As the outlines below demonstrate, all these passages essentially deal with the same basic subjects:

Revelation 6

1. War (vv. 1-2)
2. International strife (vv. 3-4)
3. Famine (vv. 5-6)
4. Pestilence (vv. 7-8)
5. Persecution (vv. 9-11)
6. Earthquake; De-creation (vv. 12-17)

Matthew 24

1. Wars (v. 6)
2. International strife (v. 7a)
3. Famines (v. 7b)
4. Earthquakes (v. 7c)
5. Persecutions (vv. 9-13)
6. De-creation (vv. 15-31)

Mark 13

1. Wars (v. 7)
2. International strife (v. 8a)
3. Earthquakes (v. 8b)
4. Famines (v. 8c)
5. Persecutions (vv. 9-13)
6. De-creation (vv. 14-27)

Luke 21

1. Wars (v. 9)
2. International strife (v. 10)
3. Earthquakes (v. 11a)
4. Plagues and famines (v. 11b)
5. Persecution (vv. 12-19)
6. De-creation (vv. 20-27)

This is very perceptive of the commentators. What is astonishing, however, is that many of them fail to see St. John's purpose in presenting the same material as Matthew, Mark, and Luke: to prophesy the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem. While all readily admit that the *Little Apocalypse* is a prophecy against Israel (see Matthew 23:29-39; 24:1-2, 15-16, 34; Mark 13:2, 14, 30; Luke

21:5-6, 20-24, 32), few seem able to make the obvious connection: the *Big Apocalypse* (the Book of Revelation) is a prophecy against Israel as well!

The Biblical Background of the Horsemen

The central Old Testament passage behind the imagery of the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" is Zechariah 6:1-7, which pictures the Four Winds as God's chariots driven by His agents, who go back and forth patrolling the earth. Following and imitating the action of the Spirit (cf. Revelation 5:6), they are God's means of controlling history (cf. Revelation 7:1, where the Four Winds are identified with, and controlled by, angels; cf. also Psalm 18:10, where the "wings of the wind" are connected with "cherubs.") Biblical symbolism views the earth (and especially the Land of Israel) as God's four-cornered altar, and thus often represents wide-sweeping, national judgments in a fourfold manner. The Horsemen, therefore, show us God's means of controlling and bringing judgment upon the disobedient nation of Israel. In particular, they symbolically represent the great devastations that Jesus predicted would come upon Israel in the last days of the Old Covenant era, leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (Matthew 24).

Just as important as Zechariah in the background of this passage is the Prayer of Habakkuk (Habakkuk 3), the traditional synagogue reading for the second day of Pentecost, in which the prophet relates a vision of God coming in judgment, shining like the sun, flashing with lightning (Habakkuk

3:3-4; cf. Revelation 1:16; 4:5), bringing pestilence and plague (Habakkuk 3:5; Revelation 6:8), shattering the mountains and collapsing the hills (Habakkuk 3:6, 10; Revelation 6:14), riding on horses against His enemies (Habakkuk 3:8, 15; Revelation 6:2, 4-5, 8), armed with a Bow (Habakkuk 3:9, 11; Revelation 6:2), extinguishing sun and moon (Habakkuk 3:11; Revelation 6:12-13) and trampling the nations in His fury (Habakkuk 3:12; Revelation 6:15). Habakkuk clearly interprets his imagery as a prophecy of the military invasion of Judah by the Chaldeans, God's heathen instruments of divine wrath (Habakkuk 3:16; cf. 1:5-17). Under similar imagery, St. John portrays Israel's destruction at the hands of the invading Edomite and Roman armies.

The White Horse

The Book-visions begin, as the Messages did, with Christ holding a cluster of seven in His hand. As the Lamb breaks each of the first four Seals, St. John hears one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, "Come!" This is not spoken as a direction to St. John to "come and see." It is, rather, that each of the living creatures calls forth one of the Four Horsemen. The four corners of the earth, as it were, standing around the altar, are calling for God's righteous judgments to come and destroy the wicked—just as the apostolic Church's characteristic cry for judgment and salvation was *Maranatha! O Lord, Come!*—and bring *Anathema!* (Early Christian documents indicate that this phrase from I Corinthians 16:22 was repeated in the closing

prayer of every Church worship service for decades prior to the fall of Jerusalem.)

As the first living creature calls, St. John sees a white horse, its Rider armed for battle, carrying a Bow. The Rider is *already victorious*, for a crown was given to Him. Having achieved victory, He rides on to further victories, going out "conquering, and to conquer." Amazingly, an interpretation popular in some circles claims that this Rider on the white horse is the Antichrist. Showing where his faith lies, one writer goes all the way and declares that the Antichrist is "*the only person* who could accomplish all of these feats"!

But there are several points about this Rider that demonstrate conclusively that He can be none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. First, *He is riding a white horse*, as Jesus does in Revelation 19:11-16. Second, *He carries a Bow*. As we have seen, the passage from Habakkuk that forms the basis for Revelation 6 shows the Lord as the Warrior-King carrying a Bow (Habakkuk 3:9, 11). St. John is also appealing here to Psalm 45, one of the great prophecies of Christ's victory over His enemies, in which the psalmist joyously calls to Him as He rides forth conquering, and to conquer:

Gird Thy sword on Thy thigh, O Mighty One,
 In Thy splendor and Thy majesty!
 And in Thy majesty ride on victoriously,
 For the cause of truth and meekness and
 righteousness;
 Let Thy right hand teach Thee awesome things.

Thine arrows are sharp;
The peoples fall under Thee;
Thine arrows are in the heart of the King's
enemies (Psalm 45:3-5).

We should ask a rather obvious question at this point—so obvious that we are apt to miss it altogether: *Where did Christ get the Bow?* The answer (as is usually the case) begins in Genesis. When God made the covenant with Noah, He declared that He was no longer at war with the earth, because of the “soothing aroma” of the sacrifice (Genesis 8:20-21); and as evidence of this He unstrung His *Bow* and hung it up “in the cloud” for all to see (Genesis 9:13-17). Later, when Ezekiel was “raptured” up to the Throneroom at the top of the Glory-Cloud, he saw the Bow hanging above the Throne (Ezekiel 1:26-28); and it was still there when St. John ascended to heaven (Revelation 4:3). But when the Lamb stepped forward to receive the Book from His Father’s hand, He also reached up and took down the Bow, to use it in judgment against the apostates of Israel. For those who “go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by

which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of Grace? For we know Him who said: 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.' And again: 'The Lord will judge His people.' It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:26-31). It was thus necessary that the first Rider should be seen carrying the Bow of God's vengeance, to signify the unleashing of the Curse upon Israel's ground; for these apostates, the Noachic covenant is undone.

St. John's first readers would immediately have understood his reference to this Rider with the Bow as speaking of Jesus Christ, on the basis of what we have already seen. But, third, there is the fact that *the Rider is given a crown*, and this too agrees with what we know about Christ from Revelation (14:14; 19:11-13). This Greek word for *crown* (*stephanos*) is used seven times in Revelation with reference to Christ and His people (2:10; 3:11; 4:4, 10; 6:2; 12:1; 14:14).

The fourth and final point, however, should render this interpretation completely secure: *the Rider goes out conquering*. This is the very same word in the Greek as that used in the letters to the seven churches for *overcoming* or *conquering* (see Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). Consider how the Revelation has used this word up to this point:

He who *conquers*, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My Throne, as I also *conquered* and sat down with My Father on His Throne (3:21).

The Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has *conquered* so as to open the Book (5:5).

And I looked, and behold, a white horse; and He who sat upon it had a Bow; and a crown was given to Him; and He went out *conquering*, and to *conquer* (6:2).

It is Christ who is the Conqueror *par excellence*. All events in history are at His command, and it is entirely appropriate that He should be the One represented here as the leader of the judgments of God. He is the Center of history, and it is He who brings judgments upon the Land. His opening of the New Covenant guaranteed the fall of Israel; as He conquered to open the Book, so He rode out in victory to implement the meaning of the Book in history. He rode forth at His Resurrection and Ascension as the already victorious King, conquering and to conquer, extending the applications of His once-for-all, definitive victory throughout the earth. And we should take special notice of the awful judgments following in His train. The Horsemen represent the forces God always uses in breaking disobedient nations, and now they are turned against His covenant people. The same holds true, of course, for all men and nations. All attempts to find peace and safety apart from Jesus Christ are doomed to failure. The nation that will not bow will be crushed by His armies, by the historical forces that are constantly at His absolute disposal.

There are differences between this vision of Christ and that in Revelation 19. The primary reason for this is that in Chapter 19, Christ is seen with a sword proceeding out of His mouth, and the vision

symbolizes His conquest of the nations after A.D. 70 with the Gospel. But that is not in view during the breaking of the Seals. Here, Christ is coming against His enemies in judgment. He is coming, not to save, not to heal, but to destroy. The awful and terrifying riders who follow Him are not messengers of hope but of wrath. Israel is doomed.

The Red Horse

As the Lamb breaks the second Seal (Revelation 6:3-4), St. John hears the second living creature saying, "Come!" In answer, a rider on a "blood-red" horse comes forth, who is granted by God the power "to take peace from the Land, and that men should slay one another; and a great sword is given to him." This second rider, standing for *war*, shows how utterly depraved man is. *God does not have to incite men to fight against each other; He simply orders His angels to take away the conditions of peace.*

In a sinful world, why are there not more wars than there are? Why is there not more bloodshed? It is because there are *restraints on man's wickedness*, on man's freedom to work out the consistent implications of his hatred and rebellion. But if God removes the restraints, man's ethical degeneracy is revealed in all its ugliness. John Calvin wrote: "The mind of man has been so completely estranged from God's righteousness that it conceives, desires, and undertakes, only that which is impious, perverted, foul, impure, and infamous. The heart is so steeped in the poison of sin, that it can breathe out nothing but a loathsome stench. But if some men occasionally make

a show of good, their minds nevertheless ever remain enveloped in hypocrisy and deceitful craft, and their hearts bound by inner depravity.”

All this was abundantly fulfilled in Israel and the surrounding nations during the Last Days, when the Land was filled with murderers, revolutionaries, and terrorists of every description; when, as the historian Josephus wrote, “every city was divided into two armies encamped against one another, and the preservation of the one party was in the destruction of the other; so the day-time was spent in the shedding of blood, and the night in fear. . . . It was then common to see cities filled with dead bodies, still lying unburied, and those of old men, mixed with infants, all dead, and scattered about together; women also lay amongst them, without any covering for their nakedness; you might then see the whole province full of inexpressible calamities, while dread of still more barbarous practices which were threatened, was everywhere greater than what had been already perpetrated” (*The Jewish War*, ii. xviii. 2).

The Black Horse

Following on the heels of war is the third angelic rider (Revelation 6:5-6), on a black horse, holding a pair of scales in his hand, a symbol of famine from the prophecy of Ezekiel, in which the starving inhabitants of Jerusalem were forced to weigh their food carefully (Ezekiel 4:10). This Horseman brings *economic hardship*, a situation described as completely chaotic. A voice from “the center of the living creatures”—i.e., from God’s Throne—says: “A quart of

wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine.” This curse thus means a shortage of the necessary staples—a measure of wheat rising to more than 1000% of its former price, consuming an entire day’s wages, so that a man’s entire labor is spent in obtaining food. This is God’s curse on men whenever they rebel: the land itself spews them out (Leviticus 18:24-28; Isaiah 24). The curse devours productivity in every area, and the ungodly culture perishes through starvation, disease, and oppression (Deuteronomy 28:15-34). This is how God controls the wicked: they must spend so much time just *surviving* that they are unable to exercise ungodly dominion over the earth. In the long run, this is the history of every culture that departs from God’s Word.

Josephus describes the frantic search for food during the final seige: “As the famine grew worse, the frenzy of the insurgents kept pace with it, and every day both these horrors burned more fiercely. For, since nowhere was grain to be seen, men would break into houses, and if they found some they mistreated the occupants for having denied their possession of it; if they found none, they tortured them as if they had concealed it more carefully. Proof whether they had food or not was provided by the physical appearance of the wretches; those still in good condition were deemed to be well provided with food, while those who were already wasting away were passed over, for it seemed pointless to kill persons who would soon die of starvation. Many secretly bartered their possessions for a single measure of

wheat if they happened to be rich, barley if they were poor. Then they shut themselves up in the darkest corners of their houses; in the extremity of hunger some even ate their grain underground, while others baked it, guided by necessity and fear. Nowhere was a table laid — the food was snatched half-cooked from the fire and torn into pieces" (*The Jewish War*, v. x. 2).

On the other hand, however, in this specific curse on Jerusalem the luxuries of oil and wine are unaffected by the general price rise; the black Horseman is forbidden to touch them. In other words, just as the people of Israel were really beginning to feel the pinch of the failure of grain, it was time to harvest the grapes and the olives. The situation is ironic, for you can survive on grain without oil and wine—but not the other way around. In all likelihood, another dimension of this expression's import is that God's messengers of destruction are kept from harming the righteous: scripture often speaks of God's blessings upon the righteous in terms of *oil* and *wine* (cf. Psalm 104:15); and, of course, oil and wine are used in the rites of the Church (James 5:14-15; I Corinthians 11:25). This would then parallel those other passages in which the godly are protected from destruction (Revelation 7:3).

The Green Horse

Finally, the fourth Seal is broken (Revelation 6:7-8), and the fourth living creature calls up the last Horseman of judgment, who rides a *green* horse—the green color connoting a sickly pallor, a presage of death. Thus the fourth rider, with a much broader

and more comprehensive commission, is named Death; and he is followed by Hades (the grave)—both having been set loose by the Son of Man, who unlocked them with His key (see Revelation 1:18). Authority is given to him to bring four plagues upon the four-cornered Land: “to kill with sword and with famine and with death and by the wild beasts of the Land.” This is simply a summary of all the covenantal curses for apostasy in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Moreover, it parallels God’s listing of His four basic categories of curses with which He punishes ungodly and disobedient nations—“My four severe judgments against Jerusalem: sword, famine, wild beasts, and plague to cut off man and beast from it!” (Ezekiel 14:21; cf. Ezekiel 5:17). At this preliminary stage, however—and in keeping with the “fourness” of the passage as a whole—Death and the grave are given authority to swallow up only a fourth of the Land. The Trumpet-judgments will take a third of the Land (Revelation 8:7-12), and the Chalice-judgments will devastate it all.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most significant obstacle to a correct interpretation of this passage has been that commentators and preachers have been afraid and unable to see that it is *God* who is bringing forth these judgments upon the Land—that they are called forth from the Throne, and that the messengers of judgment are the very angels of God. Especially vicious and harmful is any interpretation which seems to pit the Son of God against the court of heaven, so that

the curses recorded here are seen as somehow beneath His character. But it is Jesus, the Lamb, who breaks the seals of judgment, and it is Jesus, the King of kings, who rides out in conquest, leading the angelic armies against the nations, to destroy those who rebel against His universal rule.

It was crucial for the early Christians to understand this, for these judgments were even then breaking loose upon their world. In every age, Christians must face the world with confidence, with the unshakable conviction that *all* events in history are predestined, originating from the Throne of God. When we see the world convulsed with wars, famines, plagues, and natural disasters, we must say, with the Psalmist, "Come, behold the works of the LORD, who has wrought desolations in the earth" (Psalm 46:8). Ultimately, the Christian's attitude toward God's judgments upon a wicked world is the same as that of the four living creatures around the Throne, who joyfully call out to God's messengers of judgment: "*Come!*" We too, in our prayers, are to plead with God to bring down His wrath on the ungodly, to manifest His righteousness in the earth. Faced with these awesome revelations of judgment, what is our proper response? We are told, in Revelation 22:20: the Spirit and the Bride say, "*Come!*"

7

VENGEANCE FOR THE MARTYRS

For the first-century readers of Revelation, the tribulations depicted in it were becoming all too real: each church would soon know the anguish of having some of its most forthright and able leaders imprisoned and executed “because of the Word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained” (Revelation 6:9). For many Christians, all across the empire, the coming months and years would involve great distress, as families would be separated and loved ones killed. When tragedy strikes, we are all tempted to ask: Does God care? This question is especially intense when the pain is caused by vicious enemies of the faith bent on destroying God’s people, and the injustice of the suffering becomes apparent. If Christians were truly the servants of the King, when would He act? When would He come to punish the apostates who had first used the power of the Roman State to crucify the Lord, and now were using that same power to kill and crucify the “prophets and wise men and scribes”

(Matthew 23:34) whom Christ had sent?

Thus the breaking of the fifth Seal reveals a scene in heaven, where the souls of those who had been slain are underneath, or around the base of, the altar (Revelation 6:9-10). The image is taken from the Old Testament sacrifices, in which the blood of the slain victim would stream down the sides of the altar and form into a pool around its base ("the *soul* [Hebrews *nephesh*] of the flesh is in the *blood*," Leviticus 17:11). The blood of the martyrs has been poured out (cf. II Timothy 4:6), and as it fills the trench below the altar it cries out from the ground with a loud voice: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost Thou not judge and avenge our blood upon those who dwell on the Land?"

The Church in heaven agrees with the cherubim in calling forth God's judgments: *How long?* is a standard phrase throughout Scripture for invoking divine justice for the oppressed (cf. Psalm 6:3; 13:1-2; 35:17; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3-4; Habakkuk 1:2; 2:6). The particular background for its use here, however, is again in the prophecy of Zechariah (1:12): After the Four Horsemen have patrolled through the earth, the angel asks, "O LORD of Hosts, how long wilt Thou have no *compassion* for Jerusalem?" St. John reverses this. After his Four Horsemen have been sent on their mission, he shows the martyrs asking how long God will continue to *put up with* Jerusalem — how long before He destroys her for her violent oppressions.

St. John's readers would not have failed to notice another subtle point: if the martyrs' blood is flowing

around the base of the altar, it must be *the priests of Jerusalem* who have spilled it. The officers of the Covenant have slain the righteous. As Jesus and the apostles testified, Jerusalem was *the* murderer of the prophets (Matthew 23:34-37; Luke 13:33; Acts 7:51-52). The connection with “the blood of Abel” crying out from the ground near the altar (Genesis 4:10) is another indication that this passage as a whole refers to judgment upon Jerusalem (cf. Matthew 23:35-37). Like Cain, the “older brothers” of the Old Covenant envied and murdered their righteous “younger brothers” of the New Covenant (cf. I John 3:11-12). And so the blood of the righteous cries out: the saints pray that Christ’s prophecy of “the days of vengeance” (Luke 21:22) will be fulfilled.

That this blunt cry for vengeance strikes us as strange just shows how far our pietistic age has degenerated from the Biblical worldview. If our churches were more acquainted with the foundational hymnbook of the Church—*the Book of Psalms*—instead of the sugary, syrupy, sweetness-and-light choruses that characterize modern evangelical hymnals, we would understand this much easier. But we have fallen under a pagan delusion that it is somehow “unchristian” to pray for God’s wrath to be poured out upon the enemies and persecutors of the Church. Yet that is what we see God’s people doing, with God’s approval, in both Testaments of the Holy Scriptures (see, e.g., Psalm 5, 7, 35, 58, 59, 68, 69, 73, 79, 83, 109, 137, and 140). It is, in fact, a characteristic of the godly man that he despises the reprobate (Psalm 15:4). The spirit expressed in the

imprecatory prayers of Scripture is a necessary aspect — though not the whole — of the Christian's attitude (cf. II Timothy 4:14). Much of the impotence of our churches today is directly attributable to the fact that they have become emasculated and effeminate. Such churches, unable even to confront evil — much less “overcome” it — will eventually be captured and dominated by their enemies.

The righteous and faithful saints in heaven are recognized as kings and priests of God, and thus there is given to each of them a white robe (Revelation 6:11), symbolizing God's acknowledgment of their purity before Him, a symbol of the victory of the overcomers (cf. Revelation 3:4-5). The whiteness of the robe is part of a characteristic pattern in Revelation, in which the last three items in a seven-fold structure match the first four items. Thus:

First Seal: White horse

Second Seal: Red horse

Third Seal: Black horse

Fourth Seal: Green horse

Fifth Seal: White Robes

Sixth Seal: Moon like blood; Sun black

Seventh Seal: Green grass burned

In answer to the saints' plea for vengeance, God answers that they should “rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, should be completed also.” The full number of martyrs has not yet been completed; the full iniquity

of their persecutors has not yet been reached (cf. Genesis 15:16), although it is fast approaching the doom of God's "wrath to the uttermost" being poured out upon them (I Thessalonians 2:14-16). We must remember that the primary application of this has to do with apostate Israel—*those who dwell on the Land*—which (in cooperation with the Roman authorities) was murdering the saints. The martyrs are instructed to wait a little while, and God's judgment will assuredly strike, bringing the promised "Great Tribulation" upon covenant-breaking Israel.

As the sixth Seal is broken (Revelation 6:12-14), we are more clearly brought into the events of Israel's "last days." The Lamb reveals the next great aspect of His covenantal judgments, in a symbol often used in Biblical prophecy: *de-creation*. Just as the salvation of God's people is spoken of in terms of creation (cf. II Corinthians 4:6; 5:17; Ephesians 2:10; 4:24; Colossians 3:10), so God's judgments (and the revelation of His presence as Judge over a sinful world) are spoken of in terms of de-creation, the collapse of the universe—God ripping apart and dissolving the fabric of creation. Thus St. John uses the fundamental structures of creation in describing the fall of Israel:

1. Earth
2. Sun
3. Moon
4. Stars
5. Firmament
6. Land
7. Man

These seven judgments are detailed in terms of the familiar prophetic imagery of the Old Testament. First, *destabilization*: a giant earthquake (cf. Exodus 19:18; Psalm 18:7, 15; 60:2; Isaiah 13:13-14; 24:19-20; Nahum 1:5).

Second, *the eclipse and mourning of Israel*: "The sun became black as sackcloth made of hair" (Exodus 10:21-23; Job 9:7; Isaiah 5:30; 24:23; Ezekiel 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15; Amos 8:9; Micah 3:6).

Third, the image of an *eclipse* continues, with the idea of *defilement* added: "The whole moon became like blood" (Job 25:5; Isaiah 13:10; 24:23; Ezekiel 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31).

The fourth judgment affects *the stars*, which are images of *government* (Genesis 1:16); they are also clocks (Genesis 1:14), and their fall shows that *Israel's time has run out*: "The stars fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind" (Job 9:7; Ecclesiastes 12:2; Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; Ezekiel 32:8; Daniel 8:10; Joel 2:10; 3:15); the great wind, of course, was brought by the Four Horsemen, who in Zechariah's original imagery were the Four Winds (Zechariah 6:5), and who will be reintroduced to St. John in that form in Revelation 7:1; and the fig tree is Israel herself (Matthew 21:19; 24:32-34; Luke 21:29-32).

Fifth, *Israel herself now simply disappears*: "The heaven vanished," like a copper scroll snapping shut (Isaiah 34:4; 51:6; Psalm 102:25-26; on the symbolism of Israel as "heaven," see Isaiah 51:15-16; Jeremiah 4:23-31; cf. Hebrews 12:26-27).

Sixth, *the Gentile powers are shaken* as well: "Every

mountain and island were moved out of their places" (Job 9:5-6; 14:18-19; 28:9-11; Isaiah 41:5, 15-16; Ezekiel 38:20; Nahum 1:4-8; Zephaniah 2:11). God's "old creation," Israel, is thus to be de-created, as the Kingdom is transferred to the Church, the New Creation (cf. II Peter 3:7-14). Because the rulers in God's Vineyard have killed His Son, they too will be killed (Matthew 21:33-45). The Vineyard itself will be broken down, destroyed, and laid waste (Isaiah 5:1-7). In God's righteous destruction of Israel, He will shake even heaven and earth (Matthew 24:29-30; Hebrews 12:26-28) in order to deliver His Kingdom over to His new nation, the Church.

In the closing verses of Revelation 6, Old Testament prophetic imagery is still in view as St. John describes the apostates under judgment. This is the seventh phase of de-creation: *the destruction of men*. But this seventh item in the list opens up to reveal another "seven" within it (just as the seventh Seal and seventh Trumpet each contains the next set of seven judgments), for *seven classes of men* are named here, showing that the destruction is total, affecting small and great alike: "the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man."

None will be able to escape, regardless of either privileged status or insignificance. The whole Land has rejected Christ, and the whole Land is being excommunicated. Again, the parallels show that the judgment upon Israel is intended by this prophecy (cf. Isaiah 2 and 24-27), although other nations ("the kings of the earth") will be affected as well.

As the earth is de-created, and the mediating natural revelation is removed—placing sinners face-to-face with the bare revelation of the holy and righteous God—the men of Israel attempt to flee and to seek protection in anything that might seem to offer refuge. Flight underground and into caves is a sign of being under a curse (cf. Genesis 19:30-38). Thus they hid themselves (cf. Genesis 3:8) “in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains” (God’s “eye-for-an-eye” judgment on them for their mistreatment of the righteous: Hebrews 11:38; cf. Judges 7:25). St. John records their desperate plea to the mountains and rocks: “Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the Throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of His wrath has come; and [cf. Nahum 1:6; Malachi 3:2] who is able to stand?” The interpretation given here is again confirmed: this passage is not speaking of the End of the World, but of *the End of Israel in A.D. 70*. The origin of the symbolism used here is in the prophecy of Hosea against Israel:

Ephraim will be seized with shame,
 And Israel will be ashamed of its own counsel.
 Samaria will be cut off with her king,
 Like a stick on the surface of the water.
 Also, the high places of Aven, the sin of Israel,
 will be destroyed;
 Thorn and thistle will grow on their altars.
 Then they will say to the mountains: Cover us!
 And to the hills: Fall on us!
 (Hosea 10:6-8).

Jesus cited this text on His way to the crucifixion, stating that it would be fulfilled upon idolatrous Israel within the lifetimes of those who were then present:

And there were following Him a great multitude of the people, and of women who were mourning and lamenting Him. But Jesus turning to them said, Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but *weep for yourselves and for your children*. For behold, the days are coming when they will say: Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed. Then they will begin to say to the mountains: Fall on us! and to the hills: Cover us! (Luke 23:27-30).

As the churches in Asia Minor were first reading this vision, the prophesied judgments were already taking place; the final End was fast approaching. The generation that had rejected the Landlord's Son (cf. Matthew 21:33-45) would soon be screaming these very words. The crucified and resurrected Lord was coming to destroy the apostates. This was to be the great Day of the outpoured wrath of the Lamb, whom they had slain.

8

THE BOOK IS OPENED

Finally, the Lord Jesus Christ breaks the seventh Seal of the New Covenant (Revelation 8:1-2), opening it up to reveal the seven Trumpets that herald the doom of Jerusalem, the once-holy City which has become paganized and which, like its precursor Jericho, will fall by the blast of Seven Trumpets (cf. Joshua 6:4-5). But first, in this grand heavenly liturgy which makes up the Book of Revelation, there is "silence in heaven for about half an hour." The basis for this is most likely the liturgy of the Old Testament, when the singers and trumpets ceased and all bowed in reverent worship (cf. II Chronicles 29:28-29); and the specific period of a half-hour is probably related to the length of time required for a priest to enter the Temple, offer up the incense, and return (cf. Revelation 8:3-4; Leviticus 16:13-14; Luke 1:10, 21). (The technical details here are just a few of the many indications that St. John had been a priest of Israel, and may even have come from the high priest's family; his eye for minute details of worship is amazing.)

Alfred Edersheim's description of this Temple ceremony helps us understand the setting reflected here: "Slowly the incensing priest and his assistants ascended the steps to the Holy Place, preceded by the two priests who had formerly dressed the altar and the candlestick, and who now removed the vessels they had left behind, and, worshipping, withdrew. Next, one of the assistants reverently spread the coals on the golden altar; the other arranged the incense; and then the chief officiating priest was left alone within the Holy Place, to await the signal of the president before burning the incense. It was probably while thus expectant that the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias [Luke 1:8-11]. As the president gave the word of command, which marked that 'the time of incense had come,' 'the whole multitude of the people without' withdrew from the inner court, and fell down before the Lord, spreading their hands in silent prayer.

"It is this most solemn period, when throughout the vast Temple buildings deep silence rested on the worshipping multitude, while within the sanctuary itself the priest laid the incense on the golden altar, and the cloud of 'odours' [Revelation 5:8] rose up before the Lord, which serves as the image of heavenly things in this description" (*The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Christ*, p. 167).

Following this awe-filled silence, the seven angels who stand before God are given seven Trumpets (the Temple liturgy used seven trumpets also: I Chronicles 15:24; Nehemiah 12:41). St. John seems to assume that his readers will recognize these seven

angels. Why? Because he had already introduced seven “angels,” or *pastors*, in Revelation 2-3. They are the ones represented here, even if we grant that the two sets of “seven angels” are not necessarily *identical*. They are clearly meant to be related to each other, as we can see when we step back from the text (and our preconceived ideas) and allow the whole picture to present itself to us. When we do this, we see the Revelation structured in sevens, and in recurring patterns of sevens. One of those recurring patterns is that of *seven angels* (chapters 1-3, 8-11, 14, 15-16). Just as earthly worship is patterned after heavenly worship (Hebrews 8:5; 9:23-24), so is the government of the Church (Matthew 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23); moreover, according to Scripture, there are numerous correspondences between human and angelic activities (cf. Revelation 21:17). Angels are present in the worship services of the Church (I Corinthians 11:10; Ephesians 3:10)—or, more precisely, on the Lord’s Day *we* are gathered in worship around the throne of God, in the heavenly court.

Thus we are shown in the Book of Revelation that *the government of the earthly Church corresponds to heavenly, angelic government*, just as our official worship corresponds to that which is conducted around the heavenly throne by the angels. Moreover, *the judgments that fall down upon the Land are brought through the actions of the seven angels* (again, we cannot divorce the human angels from their heavenly counterparts). The officers of the Church are commissioned and empowered to bring God’s blessings and curses into fruition in the earth. *Church officers are the divinely ap-*

pointed managers of world history. The implications of this fact, as we shall see, are quite literally earth-shaking.

In Revelation 8:3-5, St. John sees another angel standing at the heavenly altar of incense, holding a golden censer. A large amount of incense, symbolic of the prayers of all the saints (see Revelation 5:8), is given to the angel that he might add it to the prayers of God's people, assuring that the prayers will be received as a sweet-smelling offering to the Lord. Then the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascends before God out of the angel's hand, as the minister offers up the petitions of his congregation.

What happens next is amazing: the angel fills the censer with coals of fire from the incense altar and casts the fire onto the earth in judgment; and this is followed by "peals of thunder and voices and flashes of lightning and an earthquake." These phenomena, of course, should be familiar to all Bible readers as the normal accompaniments of the Glory-Cloud: "So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud Trumpet sound. . . . Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently" (Exodus 19:16, 18).

The irony of this passage becomes obvious when we keep in mind that it is a prophecy against apostate Israel. In the worship of the Old Testament, the fire on the altar of burnt offering originated in heaven, coming down upon the altar when the Taber-

nacle and the Temple were made ready (Leviticus 9:24; II Chronicles 7:1). This fire, started by God, was kept burning by the priests, and was carried from place to place so that it could be used to start other holy fires (Leviticus 16:12-13; cf. Numbers 16:46-50; Genesis 22:6). Now, when God's people were commanded to destroy an apostate city, Moses further ordered: "You shall gather all its booty into the middle of its open square and burn all its booty with fire *as a whole burnt offering* to the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 13:16; Judges 20:40; cf. Genesis 19:28). The only acceptable way to burn a city as a whole burnt sacrifice was with God's fire—*fire from the altar*. Thus, when a city was to be destroyed, the priest would take fire from God's altar and use it to ignite the heap of booty which served as kindling, so offering up the entire city as a sacrifice. It is this practice of putting a city "under the ban," so that nothing survives the conflagration (Deuteronomy 13:12-18), that the Book of Revelation uses to describe God's judgment against *Jerusalem*.

God rains down His judgments upon the earth in specific response to the liturgical worship of His people. As part of the formal, official worship service in heaven, the angel of the altar offers up the prayers of the corporate people of God; and God responds to the petitions, acting into history on behalf of the saints. The intimate connection between liturgy and history is an inescapable fact, one which we cannot afford to ignore. This is not to suggest that the world is in danger of lapsing into "non-being" when the Church's worship is defective. In fact, God will use

historical forces (even the heathen) to chastise the Church when she fails to live up to her high calling as a kingdom of priests. The point here is that the official worship of the covenantal community is cosmically significant. *Church history is the key to world history*: When the worshiping assembly calls upon the Lord of the Covenant, the world experiences His judgments. History is managed and directed from the altar of incense, which has received the prayers of the Church.

In my distress I called upon the LORD,
 And cried to my God for help;
 He heard my voice out of His temple,
 And my cry for help before Him came into His
 ears.

Then the earth shook and quaked;
 And the foundations of the mountains were
 trembling

And were shaken, because He was angry.
 Smoke went up out of His nostrils,
 And fire from His mouth devoured;
 Coals were kindled by it.

He bowed the heavens also, and came down
 With thick darkness under His feet.

And He rode upon a cherub and flew;
 And he sped upon the wings of the wind.
 He made darkness His hiding place, His
 canopy around Him,

Darkness of waters, thick clouds of the skies.
 From the brightness before Him passed His
 thick clouds,

Hailstones and coals of fire.

The LORD also thundered in the heavens,
And the Most High uttered His voice,
Hailstones and coals of fire.

And He sent out His arrows, and scattered them,
And lightning flashes in abundance, and
routed them.

Then the channels of waters appeared,
And the foundations of the world were laid bare
At Thy rebuke, O LORD,
At the blast of the breath of Thy nostrils
(Psalm 18:6-15).

The Background of the Trumpet-Judgments

Several areas of the symbolic significance of trumpets are in view in this passage. First, trumpets were used in the Old Testament liturgy for ceremonial processions, particularly as an escort for the Ark of the Covenant (cf. Revelation 11:19); the obvious, prime example of this is the march around Jericho before it fell (Joshua 6; cf. I Chronicles 15:24; Nehemiah 12:41; Revelation 11:13).

Second, trumpets were blown to proclaim the rule of a new king (I Kings 1:34, 39; cf. Psalm 47:5; Revelation 11:15).

Third, the trumpet sounded an alarm, warning Israel of approaching judgment and urging national repentance (Isaiah 58:1; Jeremiah 4:5-8; 6:1, 17; Ezekiel 33:1-6; Joel 2:1, 15).

Fourth, Moses was instructed to use two silver trumpets both "for summoning the congregation" to worship and "for having the camps set out" in battle

against the enemy (Numbers 10:1-9). It is significant that these two purposes, *holy warfare* and *worship*, are mentioned in the same breath. The irony in Revelation, of course, is that God is now ordering the trumpets of holy war blown against Israel herself.

Fifth, trumpets were also blown at the feasts and on the first day of every month (Numbers 10:10), with special emphasis on Tishri 1, the civil New Year's Day (in the ecclesiastical year, the first day of the seventh month); this Day of Trumpets was the special liturgical acknowledgement of the Day of the Lord (Leviticus 23:24-25; Numbers 29:1-6). Of course, the most basic background to all this is the Glory-Cloud, which is accompanied by angelic trumpet blasts announcing the sovereignty and judgment of the Lord (Exodus 19:16); the earthly liturgy of God's people was a recapitulation of the heavenly liturgy, another indication that God's redeemed people had been restored to His image. (This was the reason for the method Gideon's army used to rout the Midianites, in Judges 7:15-22: by surrounding the enemy with lights, shouting, and the blowing of trumpets, the Israelites were an earthly reflection of God's heavenly army in the Cloud, coming in vengeance upon God's enemies.)

Not only reminding us of the fall of Jericho, the judgments brought about by the sounding of the Trumpets in Revelation also are reminiscent of the plagues that came upon Egypt prior to the Exodus. Together, they are represented as destroying one third of the Land. Obviously, since the judgment is neither total nor final, it cannot be the end of the

physical world. Nevertheless, the devastation is tremendous, and does work to bring about the end of the Jewish nation, the subject of these terrible prophecies. Israel has become a nation of Egyptians and Canaanites, and worse: a land of covenant apostates. All the curses of the Law are about to be poured out upon those who had once been the people of God (Matthew 23:35-36). The first four Trumpets apparently refer to the series of disasters that devastated Israel in the Last Days, and primarily the events leading up to the outbreak of war.

The First Trumpet

As the Seal-judgments were measured in fourths, the Trumpet-judgments are measured in thirds. The first Trumpet sounds (Revelation 8:6-7), and a *triple* curse (hail, fire, blood) is thrown down, affecting a *third* of the Land; *three* objects in particular are singled out. St. John sees "hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were thrown onto the Land." The blood of the slain witnesses is mixed with the fire from the altar, bringing wrath down upon the persecutors. The result of this curse, which has some similarities to the seventh Egyptian plague (Exodus 9:22-26), is the burning of a third of the Land and a third of the trees, and all the green grass (i.e., all the grass on a third of the Land; cf. Revelation 9:4). If the trees and grass represent the elect remnant (as they seem to in 7:3 and 9:4), this indicates that they are not exempt from physical suffering and death as God's wrath is visited upon the wicked. Nevertheless, (1) the Church cannot be completely destroyed

in any judgment (Matthew 16:18), and (2) unlike the wicked, the Christian's ultimate destiny is not wrath but life and salvation (Romans 2:7-9; 1 Thessalonians 5:9).

The wicked, on the other hand, have only wrath and anguish, tribulation and distress ahead of them (Romans 2:8-9). Literally, the vegetation of Judea, and especially of Jerusalem, was destroyed in the Roman scorched-earth methods of warfare, as Josephus reports: "The countryside, like the city, was a pitiful sight, for where once there had been a multitude of trees and parks, there was now an utter wilderness stripped bare of timber; and no stranger who had seen the old Judea and the glorious suburbs of her capital, and now beheld utter desolation, could refrain from tears or suppress a groan at so terrible a change. The war had blotted out every trace of beauty, and no one who had known it in the past and came upon it suddenly would have recognized the place, for though he was already there, he would still have been looking for the city" (*The Jewish War*, vi. i. 1). Yet this was only the beginning; many more sorrows—and much worse—lay ahead (cf. 16:21).

The Second Trumpet

With the Trumpet blast of the second angel (Revelation 8:8-9), we see a parallel to the first plague on Egypt, in which the Nile was turned to blood and the fish died (Exodus 7:17-21). The cause of this calamity was that a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea. The meaning of this becomes clear when we remember that the nation of

Israel was God's "Holy Mountain," the "mountain of God's inheritance" (Exodus 15:17). As the redeemed people of God, they had been brought back to Eden, and the repeated use of mountain-imagery throughout their history (including the fact that Mount Zion was the accepted symbol of the nation) demonstrates this vividly. But now, as apostates, Israel had become a "destroying mountain," against whom God's wrath had turned. God is now speaking of *Jerusalem* in the same language He once used to speak of *Babylon*, a fact that will become central to the imagery of this book:

Behold, I am against you, O destroying
mountain,
Destroyer of the whole earth, declares the LORD,
And I will stretch out My hand against you,
And roll you down from the crags
And I will make you a burnt out mountain. . . .
The sea has come up over Babylon;
She has been engulfed with its tumultuous
waves (Jeremiah 51:25, 42).

Connect this with the fact that Jesus, in the middle of a lengthy series of discourses and parables about the destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 20-25), cursed an unfruitful fig tree, as a symbol of judgment upon Israel. He then told his disciples, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith, and do not doubt, you shall not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to *this mountain*, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it shall happen. And all things you ask

in prayer, believing, you shall receive” (Matthew 21:21-22). Was Jesus being flippant? Did He really expect His disciples to go around praying about moving literal mountains? Of course not. More importantly, Jesus was not changing the subject. He was still giving them a lesson about the fall of Israel. What was the lesson? Jesus was instructing His disciples to pray imprecatory prayers, beseeching God to destroy Israel, to wither the fig tree, to cast the apostate mountain into the sea.

And that is exactly what happened. The persecuted Church, under oppression from the apostate Jews, began praying for God’s vengeance upon Israel (Revelation 6:9-11), calling for the mountain of Israel to “be taken up and cast into the sea.” Their offerings were received at God’s heavenly altar, and in response God directed His angels to throw down His judgments to the Land (Revelation 8:3-5). Israel was destroyed. We should note that St. John is writing this *before* the destruction, for the instruction and encouragement of the saints, so that they will continue to pray in faith. As he had told them in the beginning, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and *keep* the things that are written in it; for the time is near” (Revelation 1:3).

The Third Trumpet

Like the preceding symbol, the vision of the third Trumpet (Revelation 8:10-11) combines Biblical imagery from the falls of both Egypt and Babylon. The effect of this plague—the waters being made bitter—is similar to the first plague on Egypt, in which the

water became bitter because of the multitude of dead and decaying fish (Exodus 7:21). The bitterness of the waters is caused by a great star that fell from heaven, burning like a torch. This parallels Isaiah's prophecy of the fall of Babylon, spoken in terms of the original Fall from Paradise:

How you have fallen from heaven,
 O star of the morning, son of the dawn!
 You have been cut down to the earth,
 You who have weakened the nations!
 But you said in your heart,
 I will ascend to heaven,
 I will raise my throne above the stars of God,
 And I will sit on the mount of assembly,
 In the recesses of the north.
 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
 I will make myself like the Most High.
 Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol,
 To the recesses of the pit (Isaiah 14:12-15).

The name of this fallen star is *Wormwood*, a term used in the Law and the Prophets to warn Israel of its destruction as a punishment for apostasy (Deuteronomy 29:18; Jeremiah 9:15; 23:15; Lamentations 3:15, 19; Amos 5:7). Again, by combining these Old Testament allusions, St. John makes his point: Israel is apostate, and has become an Egypt; Jerusalem has become a Babylon; and the covenant breakers will be destroyed, as surely as Egypt and Babylon were destroyed.

The Fourth Trumpet

Like the ninth Egyptian plague of "thick darkness" (Exodus 10:21-23), the curse brought by the fourth Trumpet (Revelation 8:12-13) strikes the light-bearers, the sun, moon, and stars, so that a third of them might be darkened. The imagery here was long used in the prophets to depict the fall of nations and national rulers (cf. Isaiah 13:9-11, 19; 24:19-23; 34:4-5; Ezekiel 32:7-8, 11-12; Joel 2:10, 28-32; Acts 2:16-21). In fulfillment of this, F. W. Farrar observes, "ruler after ruler, chieftain after chieftain of the Roman Empire and the Jewish nation was assassinated and ruined. Gaius, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, all died by murder or suicide; Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, Herod Agrippa, and most of the Herodian Princes, together with not a few of the leading High Priests of Jerusalem, perished in disgrace, or in exile, or by violent hands. All these were quenched suns and darkened stars" (*The Early Days of Christianity*, p. 519).

St. John now sees an Eagle (cf. Revelation 4:7) flying in midheaven, warning of wrath to come. The Eagle, like many other covenantal symbols, has a dual nature. On one side, he signifies the salvation God provided for Israel:

For the LORD's portion is His people;
 Jacob is the allotment of His inheritance.
 He found him in a desert land,
 And in the howling waste of a wilderness;
 He encircled him, He cared for him,
 He guarded him as the pupil of His eye.

Like an Eagle that stirs up its nest,
 That hovers over its young,
 He spread His wings and caught them,
 He carried them on His pinions
 (Deuteronomy 32:9-11; cf. Exodus 19:4).

But the Eagle is also a fearsome bird of prey, associated with blood and death and rotting flesh:

His young ones also suck up blood;
 And where the slain are, there is he (Job 39:30).

The prophetic warnings of Israel's destruction are often couched in terms of eagles descending upon carrion (Deuteronomy 28:49; Jeremiah 4:13; Lamentations 4:19; Hosea 8:1; Habakkuk 1:8; Matthew 24:28). Indeed, a basic aspect of the covenantal curse is that of being devoured by the birds of the air (Genesis 15:9-12; Deuteronomy 28:26, 49; Proverbs 30:17; Jeremiah 7:33-34; 16:3-4; 19:7; 34:18-20; Ezekiel 39:17-20; Revelation 19:17-18). The Eagle-cherub will reappear in Revelation as an image of salvation (12:14), finally to be replaced by (or seen again as) an angel flying in midheaven proclaiming the *Gospel* to those who dwell on the Land (14:6), for his mission is ultimately redemptive in its scope. But the salvation of the world will come about through Israel's fall (Romans 11:11-15, 25). So the Eagle begins his message with wrath, proclaiming three Woes that are to come upon those who dwell on the Land.

Like the original plagues on Egypt, the curses

are becoming intensified, and more precise in their application. St. John is building up to a crescendo, using the three woes of the Eagle (corresponding to the fifth, sixth, and seventh blasts of the Trumpet; cf. Revelation 9:12; 11:14-15) to dramatize the increasing disasters being visited upon the Land of Israel. After many delays and much longsuffering by the jealous and holy Lord of Hosts, the awful sanctions of the Law are finally unleashed against the covenant-breakers, so that Jesus Christ may inherit the kingdoms of the world and bring them into His Temple (Revelation 11:15-19; 21:22-27).

9

JERUSALEM UNDER SIEGE

Attack from the Abyss

As the Eagle had warned (Revelation 8:13), the sounding of the fifth Trumpet (Revelation 9:1-12) signals the intensifying of the plagues in this series. While this curse is similar to the great swarms of locusts which came upon Egypt in the eighth plague (Exodus 10:12-15), these "locusts" are different: they are *demons* from the "Abyss," the bottomless pit, spoken of seven times in Revelation (9:1, 2, 11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1, 3). The Septuagint first uses the term in Genesis 1:2, speaking of the original deep-and-darkness which the Spirit creatively overshadowed (and metaphorically "overcame"; cf. John 1:5).

In Biblical symbolism, the Abyss is the farthest extreme from heaven (Genesis 49:25; Deuteronomy 33:13) and from the high mountains (Psalm 36:6). It is used in Scripture as a reference to the deepest parts of the sea (Job 28:14; 38:16; Psalm 33:7) and to subterranean rivers and vaults of water (Deuteronomy 8:7; Job 36:16), whence the waters of the Flood

came (Genesis 7:11; 8:2; Proverbs 3:20; 8:24), and which nourished the kingdom of Assyria (Ezekiel 31:4, 15). The Red Sea crossing of the covenant people is repeatedly likened to a passage through the Abyss (Psalm 77:16; 106:9; Isaiah 44:27; 51:10; 63:13). The prophet Ezekiel threatened Tyre with a great desolation of the land, in which God would bring up the Abyss to cover the city with a new Flood, bringing its people down to the pit in the lower parts of the earth (Ezekiel 26:19-21), and Jonah spoke of the Abyss in terms of excommunication from God's presence, a banishment from the Temple (Jonah 2:5-6). The domain of the Dragon (Job 41:31; Psalm 148:7; Revelation 11:7; 17:8), the prison of the demons (Luke 8:31; Revelation 20:1-3; cf. II Peter 2:4; Jude 6), and the realm of the dead (Romans 10:7) are all called by the name *Abyss*.

St. John is thus warning his readers that hell is about to break loose upon the Land of Israel; as with Tyre of old, the Abyss is being dredged up to cover the Land with its unclean spirits. Apostate Israel is to be cast out of God's presence, excommunicated from the Temple, and filled with demons. One of the central messages of Revelation is that the Church tabernacles in heaven (see Revelation 7:15; 12:12; 13:6); the corollary of this is that the false church tabernacles in hell.

Why does the locust plague last for *five months*? This figure is, first of all, a reference to the period of five months, from May through September, when locusts normally appeared. (The unusual feature is that *these* locusts *remain* for the entire period, engag-

ing in constant torment of the population.)

Second, this seems to refer in part to the actions of Gessius Florus, the procurator of Judea, who for a five-month period (beginning in May of 66 with the slaughter of 3,600 peaceful citizens) terrorized the Jews, deliberately seeking to incite them to rebellion. He was successful: Josephus dates the beginning of the Jewish War from this occasion.

Third, the use of the term *five* is associated in Scripture with power, and specifically with military organization—the arrangement of the Israelite militia in a five-squad platoon formation (Exodus 13:18; Numbers 32:17; Joshua 1:14; 4:12; Judges 7:11; cf. II Kings 1:9ff.). By God's direction, Israel was to be attacked by a demonic army from the Abyss.

During the ministry of Christ, Satan had fallen to the earth like "a star from heaven" (cf. Revelation 12:4, 9, 12); and, St. John says, "the key of the well of the Abyss was given to him. And he opened the well of the Abyss." What all this means is exactly what Jesus prophesied during His earthly ministry: the Land, which had received the benefits of His work and then rejected Him, would become glutted with demons from the Abyss. We should note here that the key is *given* to Satan, for it is God who sends the demons as a scourge upon the Jews.

The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South shall

rise up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places, seeking rest, and does not find it. Then it says, "I will return to my house from which I came"; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. Then it goes, and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. *That is the way it will also be with this evil generation* (Matthew 12:41-45).

Because of Israel's rejection of the King of kings, the blessings they had received would turn into curses. Jerusalem had been "swept clean" by Christ's ministry; now it would become "a dwelling place of demons and a prison of every unclean spirit, and a prison of every unclean and hateful bird" (Revelation 18:2). *The entire generation became increasingly demon-possessed*; their progressive national insanity is apparent as one reads through the New Testament, and its horrifying final stages are depicted in the pages of Josephus' *The Jewish War*: the loss of all ability to reason, the frenzied mobs attacking one another, the deluded multitudes following after the most transparently false prophets, the crazed and desperate chase after food, the mass murders, execu-

tions, and suicides, the fathers slaughtering their own families and the mothers eating their own children. Satan and the host of hell simply swarmed throughout the land of Israel and consumed the apostates.

The vegetation of the earth is specifically exempted from the destruction caused by the "locusts." This is a curse on disobedient *men*. Only the Christians are immune to the scorpion-like sting of the demons (cf. Mark 6:7; Luke 10:17-19; Acts 26:18); the unbaptized Israelites, who do not have "the seal of God on their foreheads" (cf. Revelation 7:3-8), are attacked and tormented by the demonic powers. And the immediate purpose God has in unleashing this curse is not *death*, but merely *torment*, as the nation of Israel is put through a series of demoniac convulsions. St. John repeats what he has told us in Revelation 6:16, that "in those days men will seek death and will not find it; and they will long to die and death shall flee from them." Jesus had specifically prophesied this longing for death among the final generation, the generation of Jews which crucified Him (Luke 23:27-30). As God had said long before: "He who sins against Me wrongs his own soul; all those who hate Me love death" (Proverbs 8:36).

The frightening description of the demon-locusts in Revelation 9:7-11 bears many similarities to the invading heathen armies mentioned in the prophets (Jeremiah 51:27; Joel 1:6; 2:4-10; cf. Leviticus 17:7 and II Chronicles 11:15, where the Hebrew word for *demon* is *hairy one*). This passage may also refer, in part, to the Satanic gangs of murderous Zealots that

preyed on the citizens of Jerusalem, ransacking houses and committing murder and rape indiscriminately. Characteristically, these perverts dressed up as harlots in order to seduce unsuspecting men to their deaths.

One particularly interesting point about the description of the demon army is St. John's statement that "the sound of their wings was like the sound of chariots, of many horses rushing to battle." That is the same sound made by the wings of the angels in the Glory-Cloud (Ezekiel 1:24; 3:13; II Kings 7:5-7); the difference here is that the noise is made by *fallen* angels.

St. John goes on to identify the king of the demons, the "angel of the Abyss," giving his name in both Hebrew (*Abaddon*) and Greek (*Apollyon*)—one of many indications of the essentially Hebraic character of the Revelation. The words mean *Destruction* and *Destroyer*; "Abaddon" is used in the Old Testament for the realm of the dead, the "place of destruction" (Job 26:6; 28:22; 31:12; Psalm 88:11; Proverbs 15:11; 27:20). St. John thus presents Satan as the very personification of death itself (cf. I Corinthians 10:10; Hebrews 2:14).

Clearly, for Satan's entire host of destroyers to be let loose upon the Jewish nation was a hell on earth indeed. And yet St. John tells us that this outbreak of demons in the land is only "the first Woe." Even greater horrors lie ahead.

Attack from the Euphrates

St. John's opening words about the sixth Trumpet (Revelation 9:13) again reminds us that the desolations wrought by God in the earth are on behalf of

His people (Psalm 46), in response to their official, covenantal worship: the command to the sixth angel is issued by a voice "from the four horns of the golden altar [i.e., the incense altar] which is before God." The mention of this point is obviously intended to encourage God's people in worship and prayer, assuring them that God's actions in history proceed from his altar, where He has received their prayers. The Church of Jesus Christ is the new Israel, the holy nation, the true people of God, who possess "confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus" (Hebrews 10:19). The first-century Church is assured by St. John that its prayers will be heard and answered by God. He will take vengeance upon their persecutors, for *the earth is both blessed and judged by the liturgical actions and judicial decrees of the Church.*

God's readiness to hear and willingness to grant His people's prayers are continually proclaimed throughout Scripture (Psalm 9:10; 10:17-18; 18:3; 34:15-17; 37:4-5; 50:14-15; 145:18-19). God has given us numerous examples of imprecatory prayers, showing repeatedly that one aspect of a godly man's attitude is hatred for God's enemies and fervent prayer for their downfall and destruction (Psalm 5:10; 10:15; 35:1-8, 22-26; 59:12-13; 68:1-4; 69:22-28; 83; 94; 109; 137:8-9; 139:19-24; 140:6-11). Why then do we not see the overthrow of the wicked in our own time? An important part of the answer is the unwillingness of the modern Church to pray Biblically; and God has assured us: *You do not have because you do not ask* (James 4:2). But the first-century Church,

praying faithfully and fervently for the destruction of apostate Israel, had been heard at God's heavenly altar. His angels were commissioned to strike.

In verses 14-16, the sixth angel is commissioned to release the four angels who had been "bound at the great river Euphrates"; they then bring against Israel an army consisting of "myriads of myriads." The Euphrates River to the north formed the boundary between Israel and the fearsome, pagan forces from Assyria, Babylon, and Persia which God used as a scourge against His rebellious people (cf. Genesis 15:18; Deuteronomy 11:24; Joshua 1:4; Jeremiah 6:1, 22; 10:22; 13:20; 25:9, 26; 46:20, 24; 47:2; Ezekiel 26:7; 38:6, 15; 39:2). It should be remembered too that the *north* was the area of God's throne (Isaiah 14:13); and both the Glory-Cloud and God's agents of vengeance are seen coming from the north, i.e., from the Euphrates (cf. Ezekiel 1:4; Isaiah 14:31; Jeremiah 1:14-15). Thus, this great army from the north is ultimately *God's* army, and under His control and direction, although it is also plainly demonic and pagan in character (on the "binding" of fallen angels, cf. II Peter 2:4; Jude 6). God is completely sovereign, and uses both demons and the heathen to accomplish His holy purposes (I Kings 22:20-22; Job 1:12-21; of course, He then punishes the heathen for their wicked motives and goals which led them to fulfill His decree; see Isaiah 10:5-14). The angels bound at the Euphrates, St. John says, "had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year," their role in history utterly predestined and certain.

The number of the horsemen is simply stated to

be “myriads of myriads,” an expression taken from Psalm 68:17, which reads: “The chariots of God are *double myriads, thousands of thousands*” — in other words, an incalculable number, one that cannot be computed. Attempts to turn this into an exact figure (as in the supposed size of the Chinese army, or the armed forces of Western Europe, and so on) are doomed to frustration. The term simply means *many thousands*, and indicates a vast host that is to be thought of in connection with the Lord’s angelic army of thousands upon thousands of chariots.

Avoiding the dazzling technological speculations advanced by some commentators on Revelation 9:17-19, we note simply that while the *number* of the army is meant to remind us of God’s army, the *characteristics* of the horses — the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which proceeded out of their mouths — remind us of the Dragon, the fire-breathing Leviathan (Job 41:18-21), and of hell itself (Revelation 9:2; 19:20; 21:8).

Thus, to sum up the idea: An innumerable army is advancing upon Jerusalem from the Euphrates, the origin of Israel’s traditional enemies; it is a fierce, hostile, demonic force sent by God in answer to His people’s prayers for vengeance. In short, this army is the fulfillment of all the warnings in the law and the prophets of an avenging horde sent to punish the covenant breakers. The horrors described in Deuteronomy 28 were to be visited upon this evil generation (see especially verses 49-68). Moses had declared: *You shall be driven mad by the sight of what you see* (Deuteronomy 28:34).

As it actually worked out in history, the Jewish rebellion in reaction to the "locust plague" of Gessius Florus during the summer of A.D. 66 provoked Cestius' invasion of Palestine in the fall, *with large numbers of mounted troops from the regions near the Euphrates* (although the main point of St. John's reference is the symbolic significance of the river in Biblical history and prophecy). After ravaging the countryside, *his forces arrived at the gates of Jerusalem in the month of Tishri—the month that begins with the Day of Trumpets.*

What happened next is one of the strangest stories in the annals of military history. The Romans surrounded the city and attacked it continuously for five days; on the sixth day, Cestius successfully led an elite force in an all-out assault against the north wall. Capturing their prize, they began preparations to set fire to the Temple. Seeing that they were completely overwhelmed, the rebels began to flee in panic, and the "moderates," who had opposed the rebellion, attempted to open the gates to surrender Jerusalem to Cestius.

Just then, at the very moment when complete victory was within his grasp, Cestius suddenly and inexplicably withdrew his forces. Surprised and encouraged, the rebels turned from their flight and pursued the retreating soldiers, inflicting heavy casualties in their attack. This unexpected success by the rebel forces had the effect of creating an enormous but completely unrealistic self-confidence among the Jews, and even the moderates joined in the general enthusiasm for war. Instead of heeding the true message of this warning blast of the

Trumpet, apostate Israel foolishly became confirmed in her rebellion.

Therefore, St. John records in verses 20-21 that “the rest of the men, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent . . . so as not to worship demons and the idols.” The Jews had so completely given themselves over to apostasy that neither God’s goodness nor His wrath could turn them from their error. Instead, as Josephus reports, even up to the very end—after the famine, the mass murders, the cannibalism, the crucifixion of their fellow Jews at the rate of 500 per day—the Jews went on heeding the insane ravings of false prophets who assured them of deliverance and victory. Josephus comments: “Thus were the miserable people beguiled by these charlatans and false messengers of God, while they disregarded and disbelieved the unmistakable portents that foreshadowed the coming desolation; but, as though thunderstruck, blind, senseless, paid no heed to the clear warnings of God” (*The Jewish War*, vi. v. 3).

Warnings of Jerusalem’s Fall

What “clear warnings” had God given them? Apart from the apostolic preaching, which was all they really needed (cf. Luke 16:27-31), God had sent miraculous signs and wonders to testify of the coming judgment; Jesus had warned that, preceding the Fall of Jerusalem, “there will be terrors and great signs from heaven” (Luke 21:11). This was especially true during the festival seasons of the year 66. Josephus continues in his report: “While the people

were assembling for the Feast of Unleavened Bread, on the eighth of the month of Nisan, at the ninth hour of the night [3:00 A.M.] *so bright a light shone round the altar and Temple that it looked like broad daylight; and this lasted for half an hour. The inexperienced regarded it as a good omen, but it was immediately interpreted by the sacred scribes in conformity with subsequent events.*"

During the same feast another shocking event took place: "The east gate of the inner sanctuary was a very massive gate made of brass and so heavy that it could scarcely be moved every evening by twenty men; it was fastened by iron-bound bars and secured by bolts that were sunk very deep into a threshold that was fashioned from a single stone block; yet *this gate was seen to open of its own accord at the sixth hour of the night* [midnight]. The Temple guards ran and reported the news to the captain and he came up and by strenuous efforts managed to close it. To the uninitiated this also appeared to be the best of omens as they had assumed that God had opened to them the gate of happiness. But wiser people realized that *the security of the Temple was breaking down of its own accord* and that the opening of the gates was a present to the enemy; and they interpreted this in their own minds as a portent of the coming desolation."

A similar event, incidentally, happened in A.D. 30, when Christ was crucified and the Temple's outer veil—24 feet wide and over 80 feet high!—ripped from top to bottom (Matthew 27:50-54; Mark 15:37-39; Luke 23:44-47). The Talmud (*Yoma* 39b) records that in A.D. 30 the gates of the Temple

opened by themselves, apparently due to the collapse of the overhead lintel, a stone weighing about 30 tons.

Those who were unable to attend the regular Feast of Passover were required to celebrate it a month later (Numbers 9:9-13). Josephus reports a third great wonder that happened at the end of this Second Passover in 66: "A supernatural apparition was seen, too amazing to be believed. What I am now to relate would, I imagine, be dismissed as imaginary, had this not been vouched for by eyewitnesses, then followed by subsequent disasters that deserved to be thus signalized. For *before sunset chariots were seen in the air over the whole country, and armed battalions speeding through the clouds and encircling the cities.*"

A fourth sign occurred inside the Temple on the next great feast day, and was witnessed by the twenty-four priests who were on duty: "At the feast called Pentecost, when the priests had entered the inner courts of the Temple by night to perform their usual ministrations, they declared that they were aware, first, of a violent commotion and din, then of a voice as of a host crying, 'We are departing hence!'"

There was a fifth sign in the heavens that year: "A star that looked like a sword stood over the city and a comet that continued for a whole year." It was obvious, as Josephus says, that Jerusalem was "no longer the dwelling place of God." Yet Israel did not repent of her wickedness. Blind to her own evils and to the increasing judgments coming upon her, she remained steadfast in her apostasy, continuing to reject the Lord and cleaving instead to her false gods.

Did the Jews really worship demons and idols? Certainly, by rejecting Jesus Christ, they inescapably involved themselves in idolatry, departing from the faith of Abraham and serving gods of their own making. Moreover, the Jewish idolatry was not some vague, undefined, apostate "theism." Forsaking Christ, *the Jews actually became worshippers of Caesar.*

Josephus bears eloquent testimony to this, writing repeatedly of God's wrath against the apostasy of the Jewish nation as the cause of their woes: "*These men, therefore, trampled upon all the laws of man, and laughed at the laws of God; and as for the oracles of the prophets, they ridiculed them as the tricks of jugglers; yet did these prophets foretell many things concerning the rewards of virtue, and punishments of vice, which when these zealots violated, they occasioned the fulfilling of those very prophecies belonging to their own country.*"

"Neither did any other city ever suffer such miseries, *nor did any age ever breed a generation more fruitful in wickedness than this was, from the beginning of the world.*"

"When the city was encircled and they could no longer gather herbs, some persons were driven to such terrible distress that they searched the common sewers and old dunghills of cattle, and ate the dung they found there; and what they once could not even look at they now used for food. When the Romans barely heard this, their compassion was aroused; yet the rebels, who saw it also, *did not repent*, but allowed the same distress to come upon themselves; for they were blinded by that fate which was already coming

upon the city, and upon themselves also.”

Israel’s idols, St. John says, are “of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood,” a standard Biblical accounting of the materials used in the construction of false gods (cf. Psalm 115:4; 135:15; Isaiah 37:19). The Bible consistently ridicules men’s idols as the works of their hands, mere sticks and stones which can neither see nor hear nor walk. This is an echo of the Psalmist’s mockery of heathen idols:

They have mouths, but they cannot speak;
 They have eyes, but they cannot see;
 They have ears, but they cannot hear;
 They have noses, but they cannot smell;
 They have hands, but they cannot feel;
 They have feet, but they cannot walk;
 They cannot make a noise with their throat.

Then comes the punchline:

Those who make them will become like them,
 Everyone who trusts in them
 (Psalm 115:5-8; cf. 135:16-18).

Herbert Schlossberg has aptly called this *reverse sanctification*—a process by which “the idolater is transformed into the likeness of the object of his worship. Israel ‘went after worthlessness, and became worthless’” (*Idols for Destruction*, p. 295). As the prophet Hosea thundered, Israel’s idolaters “became as detestable as that which they loved” (Hosea 9:10; cf. Jeremiah 2:5).

St. John's description of Israel's idolatry is in line with the usual prophetic stance; but his accusation is an even more direct reference to Daniel's condemnation of *Babylon*, specifically regarding its *worship of false gods with the holy utensils from the Temple*. Daniel said to king Belshazzar: "You have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His House before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see, hear, or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified" (Daniel 5:23).

St. John's implication is clear: *Israel has become a Babylon*, committing sacrilege by worshiping false gods with the Temple treasures; like Babylon, she has been "weighed in the balance and found wanting"; like Babylon, she will be conquered and her kingdom will be possessed by the heathen (cf. Daniel 5:25-21).

Finally, St. John summarizes Israel's crimes, all stemming from her *idolatry* (cf. Romans 1:18-32). This led to her *murders* of Christ and the saints (Acts 2:23, 36; 3:14-15; 4:26; 7:51-52, 58-60); her *sorceries* (Acts 8:9, 11; 13:6-11; 19:13-15; cf. Revelation 18:23; 21:8; 22:15); her *fornication*, a word St. John uses twelve times with reference to Israel's apostasy (Revelation 2:14; 2:20; 2:21; 9:21; 14:8; 17:2 [twice]; 17:4; 18:3 [twice]; 18:9; 19:2); and her *thefts*, a crime often associated in the Bible with apostasy and the resultant oppression and persecution of the righteous (cf.

Isaiah 61:8; Jeremiah 7:9-10; Ezekiel 22:29; Hosea 4:1-2; Mark 11:17; Romans 2:21; James 5:1-6).

Conclusion

Throughout the Last Days, until the coming of the Romans, the trumpets had blown, warning Israel to repent. But the alarm was not heeded, and the Jews became hardened in their impenitence. The retreat of Cestius was of course taken to mean that Christ's prophecies of Jerusalem's destruction were false: the armies from the Euphrates had come and surrounded Jerusalem (cf. Luke 21:20), but the threatened "desolation" had not come to pass. Instead, the Romans had fled, dragging their tails between their legs. Increasingly confident of divine blessing, the Jews recklessly plunged ahead into greater acts of rebellion, unaware that even greater forces beyond the Euphrates were being readied for battle. This time, there would be no retreat. Judea would be turned into a desert, the Israelites would be slaughtered and enslaved, and the Temple would be razed to the ground, without a stone left upon another.

10

ALL CREATION TAKES VENGEANCE

The Seventh Trumpet was the sign that "there shall be no more delay" (cf. Revelation 10:6-7). Time had run out; wrath to the utmost had now come upon Israel. From this point on, St. John abandons the language and imagery of mere warning. Jerusalem's destruction is certain, and so the prophet concentrates wholly on the message of her impending doom. As he describes the City's fate, he extends and intensifies the Exodus imagery that has already been so pervasive throughout the prophecy. He speaks of "the Great City" (16:19), reminding his readers of a previous reference: "the Great City, which Spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified" (11:8). Jerusalem is called Sodom because of its sensual, luxurious apostasy (cf. Ezekiel 16:49-50), and because it is devoted to total destruction as a whole burnt sacrifice (Genesis 19:24-28; Deuteronomy 13:12-18). But St. John's more usual metaphors for the Great City are taken from the Exodus pattern: Jerusalem is not only

Egypt, but also the other enemies of Israel. He has shown the Egyptian Dragon chasing the Woman into the wilderness (Revelation 12); a revived Balak and Balaam seeking to destroy God's people by war and by seduction to idolatry (Revelation 13); the sealed armies of the New Israel gathered on Mount Zion to celebrate the feasts (Revelation 14); and the saints standing in triumph at the "Red Sea," singing the Song of Moses (Revelation 15). Now, in Chapter 16, seven judgments corresponding to the ten Egyptian Plagues are to be poured out on the Great City.

There is also a marked correspondence between these Chalice-judgments and the Trumpet-judgments of Chapters 8-11.¹ Because the Trumpets were essentially warnings, they took only a third of the Land; with the Chalice, the destruction is total.

Chalices

1. On the Land, becoming sores (16:2).
2. On the sea, becoming blood (16:3).
3. On rivers and springs, becoming blood (16:4-7).
4. On the sun, causing it to scorch (16:8-9).
5. On the throne of the Beast, causing darkness (16:10-11).

1. The correspondence is not exact, however; and Russell characteristically goes too far when, after a superficial comparison, he categorically declares: "This cannot be mere casual coincidence: it is *identity*, and it suggests the inquiry, For what reason is the vision thus repeated?" J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, [1887] 1983), p. 476.

6. On the Euphrates, drying it up to make way for kings of the east; invasion of frog-demons; Armageddon (16:12-16).
7. On the air, causing storm, earthquake, and hail (16:17-21).

Trumpets

1. On the Land; $\frac{1}{3}$ earth, trees, grass burned (8:7).
2. On the sea; $\frac{1}{3}$ sea becomes blood, $\frac{1}{3}$ sea creatures die, $\frac{1}{3}$ ships destroyed (8:8-9).
3. On the rivers and springs; $\frac{1}{3}$ waters become wormwood (8:10-11).
4. $\frac{1}{3}$ of sun, moon, and stars darkened (8:12).
5. Demonic locusts tormenting men (9:1-12).
6. Army from Euphrates kills $\frac{1}{3}$ mankind (9:13-21).
7. Voices, storm, earthquake, hail (11:15-19).

Plagues on Egypt

1. Boils (sixth plague: Exodus 9:8-12).
2. Waters become blood (first plague: Exodus 7:17-21).
3. Waters become blood (first plague: Exodus 7:17-21).
4. Darkness (ninth plague: Exodus 10:21-23).
5. Locusts (eighth plague: Exodus 10:4-20).
6. Invasion of frogs from river (second plague: Exodus 8:2-4).
7. Hail (seventh plague: Exodus 9:18-26).

“A loud voice from the Temple” issues the command authorizing the Chalice-judgments (Revela-

tion 16:1). Again, St. John underscores a basic point of his prophecy: that these terrible plagues originate from both God and the Church (cf. 15:5-8). These are judgments from God in response to the prayers of His saints.

I have called these seven containers *Chalices* (rather than *vials* [KJV] or *bowls* [NASV]) to emphasize their character as a "*Negative Sacrament.*" From one perspective, the substance in the Chalices (God's wrath, which is "hot," cf. 14:10) seems to be *fire*, and several commentators have therefore seen the containers as incense-bowls (as in 5:8; cf. 8:3-5). Yet the wicked are condemned in 14:10 to "drink of the *wine* of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger"; and, when the plagues are poured out, the "Angel of the waters" exults in the appropriateness of God's justice: "For they poured out the blood of saints and prophets, and Thou hast given them *blood* to drink" (16:6). A few verses later, St. John returns to the image of "the cup of the *wine* of His fierce wrath" (16:19). What is being modeled in heaven for the Church's instruction on earth is *the final excommunication of apostate Israel*, when the Communion of the Body and Blood of the Lord is at long last denied to her. The angel-pastors, entrusted with the Sacramental sanctions of the New Covenant, are sent from the heavenly Temple itself, and from the Throne of God, to pour out upon her the Blood of the Covenant. Jesus warned the rebels of Israel that He would send His martyrs to them to be killed, "so that *upon you may fall all the righteous blood* shed on earth, from the *blood* of righteous Abel to the

blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the Temple and the Altar. Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation" (Matthew 23:35-36). Drinking blood is inescapable: either the ministers of the New Covenant will serve it to us in the Eucharist, or they will pour it out of their Chalices upon our heads.

Accordingly, seven angels come out from the Temple (cf. 15:1) and are told to *pour out* the Chalices of God's wrath: the Septuagint uses this verb (*ekcheo*) in the directions to the priest to *pour out the blood of the sacrifice* around the base of the altar (cf. Leviticus 4:7, 12, 18, 25, 30, 34; 8:15; 9:9). The term is used in Ezekiel with reference to apostate Israel's fornication with the heathen (Ezekiel 16:36; 23:8), of her shedding of innocent blood through oppression and idolatry (Ezekiel 22:3-4, 6, 9, 12, 27), and of God's threat to pour out His wrath upon her (Ezekiel 14:19; 20:8, 13, 21; 21:31; 22:27). In the New Testament, it is similarly used in contexts that parallel major themes in Revelation: the spilling of wine (Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37), the shedding of Christ's blood (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20), the shedding of the martyrs' blood (Matthew 23:35; Luke 11:50; Acts 22:20; Romans 3:15), and the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2:17-18, 33; 10:45; Romans 5:5; Titus 3:6; cf. Joel 2:28-29; Zechariah 12:10).

All these different associations are in the background of this outpouring of plagues into the Land that has spilled the blood of Christ and His witnesses, the people who have resisted and rejected the Spirit. The old wineskins of Israel are about to split open.

The First Chalice

As the first angel pours out his Chalice onto the Land (Revelation 16:2), it becomes “a loathsome and malignant sore upon the men who had the mark of the Beast and who worshiped his image.” The sores are a fitting retribution for apostasy, God placing His stamp of wrath upon those who wear the Beast’s mark. Just as God had poured out boils on the ungodly, state-worshipping Egyptians who persecuted His people (Exodus 9:8-11), so he is plaguing these worshipers of the Beast in the Land of Israel—the covenant people who have now become Egypt-like persecutors of the Church. This plague is specifically mentioned by Moses in his list of the curses of the covenant for idolatry and apostasy: “The LORD will smite you with the boils of Egypt and with tumors and with the scab and with the itch, from which you cannot be healed. . . . The LORD will strike you on the knees and legs with sore boils, from which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head” (Deuteronomy 28:27, 35).

The Second Chalice

The second angel pours out his Chalice into the sea (Revelation 16:3), and it becomes *blood*, as in the first Egyptian plague (Exodus 7:17-21) and the Second Trumpet (Revelation 8:8-9). This time, however, the blood is not running in streams, but instead is like that of a dead man: clotted, coagulated, and putrefying. Blood is mentioned four times in this chapter; it covers the face of Israel, spilling over the four corners of the Land.

While the primary significance of this plague is symbolic, referring to the uncleanness of contact with blood and death (cf. Leviticus 7:26-27; 15:19-33; 17:10-16; 21:1; Numbers 5:2; 14:11-19), there are close parallels in the actual events of the Great Tribulation. On one occasion, thousands of Jewish rebels fled to the Sea of Galilee from the Roman massacre of Tarichaeae. Setting out on the lake in small, flimsy boats, they were soon pursued and overtaken by the sturdy rafts of Vespasian's superior forces. Then, as Josephus recounts, they were mercilessly slaughtered: "The Jews could neither escape to land, where all were in arms against them, nor sustain a naval battle on equal terms. . . . Disaster overtook them and they were sent to the bottom, boats and all. Some tried to break through, but the Romans could reach them with their lances, killing others by leaping upon the barks and passing their swords through their bodies; sometimes as the rafts closed in, the Jews were caught in the middle and captured along with their vessels. If any of those who had been plunged into the water came to the surface, they were quickly dispatched with an arrow or a raft overtook them; if, in their extremity, they attempted to climb on board the enemy's rafts, the Romans cut off their heads or their hands. So these wretches died on every side in countless numbers and in every possible way, until the survivors were routed and driven onto the shore, their vessels surrounded by the enemy. As they threw themselves on them, many were speared while still in the water; many jumped ashore, where they were killed by the Romans.

“One could see the whole lake stained with blood and crammed with corpses, for not a man escaped. During the days that followed a horrible stench hung over the region, and it presented an equally horrifying spectacle. The beaches were strewn with wrecks and swollen bodies, which, hot and clammy with decay, made the air so foul that the catastrophe that plunged the Jews in mourning revolted even those who had brought it about” (*The Jewish War*, iii. x. 9).

The Third Chalice

The plague of the Third Chalice (Revelation 16:4-7) more directly resembles the first Egyptian plague (and the Third Trumpet: cf. 8:10-11), since it affects “the rivers and the springs of waters,” turning all the drinking water to blood. Water is a symbol of life and blessing throughout Scripture, beginning from the story of creation and the Garden of Eden. In this plague, the blessings of Paradise are reversed and turned into a nightmare; what was once pure and clean becomes polluted and unclean through apostasy.

The “Angel of the Waters” responds to this curse by praising God for His just judgment: “Righteous art Thou, who art and who wast, O Holy One, because Thou didst judge these things.” We should not be embarrassed by a passage such as this. The whole Bible is written from the perspective of *cosmic personalism*—the doctrine that God, who is absolute personality, is constantly active throughout His creation, everywhere present with the whole of His being, bringing all things to pass immediately by His power and mediately through His angelic servants.

There is no such thing as "natural law"; we might do better to speak of God's "covenantal *habits*," or the *habitual order which God imposes on His creation through the actions of His angels*. Our sciences are nothing more than the study of the habitual patterns of the personal activity of God and His heavenly messengers.

This is, in fact, precisely what guarantees the validity and reliability of both scientific investigation and prayer. On the one hand, God's angels have *habits* — a cosmic dance, a liturgy involving every aspect of the whole universe, that can be depended upon in all of man's technological labors as he exercises dominion under God over the world. On the other hand, God's angels are personal beings, constantly carrying out His commands; in response to our petitions, He can and does order the angels to change the dance.

There is, therefore, an "Angel of the Waters"; and he, along with all of God's personal creation, rejoices in God's righteous government of the world. God's strict justice, summarized in the principle of *an eye for an eye* (Exodus 21:23-25), is evidenced in this judgment, for the punishment fits the crime: "They poured out the blood of saints and prophets," cries the Angel of the Waters, "and Thou hast given them blood to drink!" As we have seen, the characteristic crime of Israel was always the murder of the prophets (cf. II Chronicles 36:15-16; Luke 13:33-34; Acts 7:52): Jesus named this fact as the specific reason why *the blood of the righteous* would be poured out in judgment upon that generation (Matthew 23:31-36).

The Angel of the Waters concludes with an inter-

esting statement: by the apostates' shedding of blood, "they are *worthy!*" This is a deliberate parallel to the message of the New Song in Revelation 5:9: "*Worthy art Thou* to take the Book, and to break its seals; for *Thou wast slain*, and didst purchase us for God *with Thy blood.*" Just as the Lamb received His reward on the basis of the blood He shed, so these persecutors have now received the just recompense for their bloodshed.

God had once promised the oppressed of Israel that He would render to their enemies according to their evil works:

I will feed your oppressors with their own flesh,
And they will become drunk with their own
blood as with sweet wine;
And all flesh will know that I, the LORD, am
your Savior,
And your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob
(Isaiah 49:26).

Israel's apostasy has reversed this: now it is she, the Persecutor *par excellence*, who will be forced to drink her own blood and devour her own flesh. This was true in much more than a figurative sense: as God had foretold through Moses (Deuteronomy 28:53-57), during the siege of Jerusalem the Israelites actually became cannibals; mothers literally ate their own children. Because they shed the blood of the saints, God gives them their own blood to drink (cf. Revelation 17:6; 18:24).

Joining the angel in praise comes the voice of the

Altar itself, where the blood of the saints and prophets had been poured out. The Altar rejoices: "Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are Thy judgments!" The saints gathered round the base of the Altar had cried out for justice, for vengeance on their oppressors (Revelation 6:9-11). In the destruction of Israel that prayer is answered; the witnesses are vindicated. It is more than coincidental that these prayers in Revelation 16:5-7 (along with the text of the Song of Moses in Revelation 15:3-4) are strikingly similar to the song sung by the priests just before the offering of the sacrifices. Ironically—just as God Himself is preparing for the Whole Burnt Sacrifice of A.D. 70—the very angels of heaven were singing apostate Israel's own liturgy against her.

The Fourth Chalice

The fourth angel (Revelation 16:8-9) now pours out his Chalice upon the sun, scorching the men with fire. Whereas the Fourth Trumpet resulted in a plague of darkness (8:12), now the heat of the sun is increased, so that the men were "scorched with great heat." This too is a reversal of a basic covenantal blessing that was present in the Exodus, when Israel was shielded from the heat of the sun by the Glory-Cloud, the Shadow of the Almighty (Exodus 13:21-22; cf. Psalm 91:1-6). This promise is repeated again and again throughout the prophets:

The LORD is your keeper;
 The LORD is your shade on your right hand.
 The sun will not smite you by day,

Nor the moon by night.

The LORD will protect you from all evil;
He will keep your soul (Psalm 121:5-7).

They will not hunger or thirst,
Neither will the scorching heat or sun strike
them down;
For He who has compassion on them will lead
them,
And will guide them to springs of water
(Isaiah 49:10).

Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,
And whose trust is the LORD.
For he will be like a tree planted by the water,
That extends its roots by a stream
And will not fear when the heat comes;
But its leaves will be green,
And it will not be anxious in a year of drought
Nor cease to yield fruit (Jeremiah 17:7-8).

And He who sits on the Throne shall spread
His Tabernacle over them. They shall hunger
no more, neither thirst anymore; neither shall
the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for
the Lamb in the center of the Throne shall be
their Shepherd, and shall guide them to springs
of the waters of life; and God shall wipe away
every tear from their eyes (Revelation 7:15-17).

Throughout the Book of Revelation, St. John
often uses the passive voice (as in the expression *it
was given*) to indicate God's sovereign control of
events. He again stresses God's sovereignty by tell-

ing us that *it was given* to the sun to scorch the men; and, in the very next line, he is even more explicit: "God . . . has the power over these plagues." St. John knows nothing of a "God" who sits helplessly on the sidelines, watching the world go by; nor does he acknowledge a "God" who is too nice to send judgments on the wicked. He knows that the plagues falling upon Israel are "the works of the LORD, who has wrought desolations in the earth" (Psalm 46:8).

In his book on the Trinity, St. Augustine emphasizes the same point: "The whole creation is governed by its Creator, from whom and by whom and in whom it was founded and established. And thus the will of God is the first and supreme cause of all corporal appearances and motions. For nothing happens in the visible and sensible sphere which is not ordered, or permitted, from the inner, invisible, and intelligible court of the most high Emperor, in this vast and illimitable commonwealth of the whole creation, according to the inexpressible justice of His rewards and punishments, graces and retributions."

But the apostates refused to submit to God's lordship over them. Like the Beast of Rome, whose head was crowned with "names of blasphemy" (13:1) and whose image they worshiped, the men blasphemed the name of God who has the power over these plagues. And, like the impenitent Pharaoh (cf. Exodus 7:13, 23; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34-35; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:8), "they did not repent so as to give Him glory." Israel had become an Egypt, hardening her heart; and, like Egypt, she would be utterly destroyed.

11

IT IS FINISHED!

The symbolic targets of the first four Chalicees were the elements of the physical creation: Land, sea, waters, and the sun. With the last three Chalicees, the consequences of the angelic attack are more “political” in nature: the disruption of the Beast’s kingdom; the War of the great Day of God; and the Fall of “Babylon.”

The Fifth Chalice

Although most of the judgments throughout Revelation are aimed specifically at apostate Israel, the heathen who join Israel against the Church come under condemnation as well. Indeed, the Great Tribulation itself would prove to be “the hour of testing, that hour which is to come upon *the whole world*, to test those who dwell upon *the Land*” (3:10). The fifth angel (Revelation 16:10-11) therefore pours out his Chalice “upon the throne of the Beast”; and, even as the sun’s heat is scorching those who worship the Beast, the lights are turned out on his kingdom, and

it becomes *darkened*—which is, as we saw in our study of Matthew 24, a standard Biblical symbol for political turmoil and the fall of rulers (cf. Isaiah 13:9-10; Amos 8:9; Ezekiel 32:7-8). The primary significance of this plague is still the judgment on Israel, for (in terms of the message of Revelation) *she* was the “throne” and “kingdom” of the Beast. Moreover, as we shall see, the people who suffer from the Fifth Chalice are identified as suffering as well from the First Chalice, which was poured out upon the Land, upon the Israelite worshipers of the Beast (Revelation 16:2).

It is also likely, however, that this judgment partially corresponds to the wars, revolutions, riots, and “world-wide convulsions” that racked the Empire after Nero committed suicide in June 68. The great 19th-century scholar F. W. Farrar wrote in this connection of “the horrors inflicted upon Rome and Romans in the civil wars by provincial governors—already symbolized as the horns of the Wild Beast, and here characterized as kings yet kingdomless. Such were Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian. Vespasian and Mucianus deliberately planned to starve the Roman populace; and in the fierce struggle of the Vitellians against Sabinus and Domitian, and the massacre which followed, there occurred the event which sounded so portentously in the ears of every Roman—the burning to the ground of the Temple of the Capitoline Jupiter, on December 19th, A.D. 69. It was not the least of the signs of the times that the space of one year saw wrapped in flames the two most hallowed shrines of the ancient world—the

Temple of Jerusalem and the Temple of the great Latin god" (*The Early Days of Christianity*, pp. 555f.).

One passage from Tacitus, the Roman historian, provides some idea of the chaotic conditions in the capital city: "Close by the fighting stood the people of Rome like the audience at a show, cheering and clapping this side or that in turns as if this were a mock battle in the arena. Whenever one side gave way, men would hide in shops or take refuge in some great house. They were then dragged out and killed at the instance of the mob, who gained most of the loot, for the soldiers were bent on bloodshed and massacre, and the booty fell to the crowd.

"The whole city presented a frightful caricature of its normal self: fighting and casualties at one point, baths and restaurants at another, here the spilling of blood and the litter of dead bodies, close by prostitutes and their like—all the vice associated with a life of idleness and pleasure, all the dreadful deeds typical of a pitiless sack. These were so intimately linked that an observer would have thought Rome in the grip of a simultaneous orgy of violence and dissipation. There had indeed been times in the past when armies had fought inside the city, twice when Lucius Sulla gained control, and once under Cinna. No less cruelty had been displayed then, but now there was a brutish indifference, and not even a momentary interruption in the pursuit of pleasure. As if this were one more entertainment in the festive season, they gloated over horrors and profited by them, careless which side won and glorying in the calamities of the state" (*The Histories*, iii. 83).

Again St. John draws attention to the impenitence of the apostates. Their response to God's judgment is only greater rebellion — yet their rebellion is becoming increasingly impotent: "They gnawed their tongues because of pain, and they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores; and they did not repent, so as to give Him glory." A distinguishing mark of the Chalice-plagues is that they come all at once, with no "breathing space" between them. The plagues are bad enough one at a time, as in the judgments on Egypt. But these people are still gnawing their tongues and blaspheming God on account of their *sores* — the sores that came upon them when the *First Chalice* was poured out. The judgments are being poured out so quickly that each successive plague finds the people still suffering from all those that preceded it. And, because their character has not been transformed, they do not repent. The notion that great suffering produces godliness is a myth. Only the grace of God can turn the wicked from rebellion; but Israel has resisted the Spirit, to its own destruction.

The Sixth Chalice

Corresponding to the Sixth Trumpet (Revelation 9:13-21), the Sixth Chalice is poured out "upon the great river, the Euphrates; and its water was dried up, that the way might be prepared for the kings from the rising of the sun" (Revelation 16:12). As we saw earlier, the Euphrates was Israel's northern frontier, from which invading armies would come to ravage and oppress the covenant people. The image

of the drying of the Euphrates for a conquering army is taken, in part, from a stratagem of Cyrus the Persian, who conquered Babylon by temporarily turning the Euphrates out of its course, enabling his army to march up the riverbed into the city, taking it by surprise. The more basic idea, of course, is the drying up of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21-22) and the Jordan River (Joshua 3:9-17; 4:22-24) for the victorious people of God. Again there is the underlying note of tragic irony: Israel has become the new Babylon, an enemy of God that must now be conquered by a new Cyrus, as the true covenant people are miraculously delivered and brought into their inheritance. The coming of the armies from the Euphrates, of course, represents the final siege of Jerusalem by the armies of Titus; and it is certainly more than coincidental that thousands of these very troops actually did come from the Euphrates.

In verses 13-14 of Revelation 16, St. John records the appearance of three unclean spirits proceeding out of the mouths of the Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet (the "Land Beast," or leadership of Israel, spoken of in Revelation 13:11; cf. 19:20). A connection with the second Egyptian plague is established here, for the multitude of frogs that infested Egypt came from the river (Exodus 8:1-7). St. John has combined these images in these verses: first, an invasion from a river (v. 12); second, a plague of frogs (in the Old Covenant dietary laws, frogs are unclean: Leviticus 11:9-12, 41-47). Third, these "frogs" are really spirits of demons, performing signs in order to deceive mankind. There is a multiple em-

phasis on the Dragon (imitated by his cohorts) throwing things from his mouth (cf. Revelation 12:15-16; 13:5-6; contrast 1:16; 11:5; 19:15, 21); and the triple repetition of *mouth* here serves also as another point of contact with the Sixth Trumpet (9:17-19).

These unclean spirits from the devil, the Roman government, and the leaders of Israel go out to the kings of the whole world (cf. Psalm 2) to gather them together for the War of that great Day of God. By their false prophecy and miraculous works they incite the armies of the world to join together in war against God. What they do not realize is that the battle is the Lord's, and that the armies are being brought to fulfill God's purposes, not their own. It is He who prepares the way for them, even drying up the Euphrates for their passage.

Micaiah the prophet gave a much similar message to the evil king Ahab of Israel, explaining why Ahab would be killed in battle against the Aramaeans:

I saw the LORD sitting on His Throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right and on His left. And the LORD said, "Who will entice Ahab to go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?" And one said this while another said that. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD and said, "I will entice him." And the LORD said to him, "How?" And he said, "I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all his prophets." Then He said, "You are to entice him and also prevail. Go and do so" (I Kings 22:19-22).

This is echoed in St. Paul's prophecy to the Thessalonians:

For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of his mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His Coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accordance with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

And for this reason God will send upon them a work of error so that they might believe the lie, in order that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness (II Thessalonians 2:7-12).

Ultimately, the "work of error" performed by these lying spirits is sent by God in order to bring about the destruction of His enemies in the War of "that great Day of God," a Biblical term for a Day of Judgment, of calamity for the wicked (cf. Isaiah 13:6, 9; Joel 2:1-2, 11, 31; Amos 5:18-20; Zephaniah 1:14-18). Specifically, this is to be the Day of Israel's condemnation and execution; the Day, as Jesus foretold in His parable, when the King would send His armies to destroy the murderers and set their City on

fire (Matthew 22:7). St. John underscores this point again by referring to the Lord as *God the Almighty*, the Greek translation of the Hebrew expression *God of Hosts*, the Lord of the *armies* of heaven and earth (cf. 1:8). The armies coming to bring about Israel's destruction — regardless of their motivation — are God's armies, sent by Him (even through "lying spirits," if necessary) to bring about His purposes, for His glory. The evil frog-demons perform their false wonders and works of error because God's angel poured out his Chalice of wrath.

The narrative is suddenly interrupted by Christ's statement in verse 15: *Behold, I am coming like a thief!* This is the central theme of the Book of Revelation, summarizing Christ's warnings to the churches in the Seven Letters (cf. Revelation 2:5, 16, 25; 3:3, 11). The coming of the Roman armies will be, in reality, Christ's Coming in terrible wrath against His enemies, those who have betrayed Him and slain His witnesses. The specific wording and imagery seem to be based on the Letter to the church in Sardis: "*I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you*" (Revelation 3:3; cf. Matthew 24:42-44; Luke 12:35-40; I Thessalonians 5:1-11).

The same Letter to Sardis also says: "*Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. . . . But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white; for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments . . .*" (Revelation 3:2, 4-5). Similarly,

the text of the sixth Chalice continues: "Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his garments, lest he walk about naked and men see his shame" (cf. Revelation 3:18, in the Letter to Laodicea: "I advise you to buy from Me . . . *white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed*").

The symbolism of this is based on the punishment for those Temple guards who fell asleep while on duty: their clothes were confiscated and burned. Christ is rebuking the guardians of Israel for their Spiritual sloth, warning that they are about to be cast out of office when He comes in judgment. They fell asleep, and now it is too late—the Temple is going to be attacked and destroyed. Judgment and destruction are approaching rapidly; there is no time left to waste, and the churches must be awake and on the alert.

St. John picks up the story again in verse 16: the demons gather the kings of earth together "to the place which in Hebrew is called Armageddon." Literally, this is spelled *Har-Magedon*, meaning *Mount Megiddo*. A problem for "literalists" arises here, for Megiddo is a city on a plain—not a mountain! *There never was or will be a literal "Battle of Armageddon," for there is no such place.* The mountain nearest to the plain of Megiddo is Mount Carmel, and this is presumably what St. John had in mind. Why didn't he simply say "Mount Carmel"? Probably because he wanted to bring *both* ideas together—*Carmel* because of its association with the defeat of Jezebel's false prophets, and *Megiddo* because it was the scene of

several important military engagements in Biblical history. Megiddo is listed among the conquests of Joshua (Joshua 12:21), and it is especially important as the place where Deborah defeated the kings of Canaan (Judges 5:19). King Ahaziah of Judah, the evil grandson of King Ahab of Israel, died at Megiddo (II Kings 9:27). Perhaps the most significant event that took place there, in terms of St. John's imagery, was the confrontation between Judah's King Josiah and the Egyptian Pharaoh Neco. In deliberate disobedience to the Word of God, Josiah faced Neco in battle at Megiddo and was mortally wounded (II Chronicles 35:20-25). Following Josiah's death, Judah's downward spiral into apostasy, destruction, and bondage was swift and irrevocable (II Chronicles 36). The Jews mourned for Josiah's death, even down through the time of Ezra (see II Chronicles 35:25), and the prophet Zechariah uses this as an image of Israel's mourning for the Messiah. After promising to "destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem" (Zechariah 12:9), God says:

And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit on grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born. In that day there will be great mourning in Jerusalem, like the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the plain of Megiddo. And the Land will mourn, every family by itself . . . (Zechariah 12:10-11).

This is then followed by God's declaration that He will remove from Israel the idols, the false prophets, and the evil spirits (Zechariah 13), and that He will bring hostile armies to besiege Jerusalem (Zechariah 14).

"Megiddo" thus was for St. John a symbol of defeat and desolation, a "Waterloo" signifying the defeat of those who set themselves against God, who obey false prophets instead of the true.

The Seventh Chalice

Finally, the seventh angel pours out his Chalice *upon the air*, in order to produce the lightning and thunder (v. 18) and hail (v. 21). Again a Voice comes "from the Temple of heaven, from the Throne," signifying God's control and approval. St. John has already announced that these seven Chalice-plagues were to be "the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished" (Revelation 15:1); with the Seventh Chalice, therefore, the Voice proclaims: *It is done!* (cf. John 19:30; Revelation 21:6).

Again St. John records the phenomena associated with the Day of the Lord and the covenant-making activity of the Glory-Cloud: flashes of lightning, peals of thunder, voices, and "a great earthquake" (Revelation 16:18). Seven times in Revelation St. John mentions an earthquake (6:12; 8:5; 11:13 [twice]; 11:19; 16:18 [twice]), emphasizing its covenantal dimensions. Christ came to bring *the definitive earthquake, the great cosmic earthquake of the New Covenant*: "one such as there had not been since the men came to be upon the Land, so mighty an earth-

quake, and so great" (cf. Matthew 24:21; Exodus 9:18, 24; Daniel 12:1; Joel 2:1-2).

This was also the message of the writer to the Hebrews. Comparing the covenant made at Sinai with the coming of the New Covenant (which would be established at the destruction of the Temple and the complete passing of the Old Covenant), he announced that the "heavens and earth" of the Mosaic economy were passing away, having been replaced by Christ's eternal Kingdom:

See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused Him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. And His Voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying: *Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven* [Haggai 2:6]. And this expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things that can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since *we receive a Kingdom that cannot be shaken*, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:25-29).

St. John has made it clear that "the Great City" is the Old Jerusalem, where the Lord was crucified (Revelation 11:8; cf. 14:8); originally intended to be "the light of the world, a City set on a hill," she is

now an apostate murderess, condemned to perish. Under the judgment of the seventh Chalice, she is to be "split into three parts" (Revelation 16:19). This imagery is drawn from the fifth chapter of Ezekiel, in which God instructs the prophet to stage a drama portraying the coming destruction of Jerusalem. Ezekiel was to shave his head with a sharp sword and then carefully divide the hair into three parts:

One third you shall burn in the fire at the center of the city. . . . Then you shall take one third and strike it with the sword all around the city, and one third you shall scatter to the wind; and I will unsheathe a sword behind them. Take also a few in number from them and bind them in the edges of your robes. And take again some of them and throw them into the fire, and burn them in the fire; from it a fire will spread to all the house of Israel.

Thus says the Lord GOD: This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her. But she has rebelled against My ordinances more wickedly than the nations and against My statutes more than the lands that surround her; for they have rejected My ordinances and have not walked in My statutes.

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD: Because you have more turmoil than the nations that surround you, and have not walked in My statutes, nor observed My ordinances, nor observed the ordinances of the nations that

surround you; therefore, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, even I, am against you, and I will execute judgments against you in the sight of the nations. And because of all your abominations, I will do among you what I have not done, and the like of which I will never do again. Therefore, fathers will eat their sons among you, and sons will eat their fathers; for I will execute judgments on you, and scatter all your remnant to every wind.

So as I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely, because you have defiled My sanctuary with all your detestable idols and with all your abominations, therefore I will also withdraw, and My eye shall have no pity and I will not spare. One third of you will die by plague or be consumed by famine among you, one third will fall by the sword around you, and one third I will scatter to every wind, and I will unsheathe a sword behind them (Ezekiel 5:1-12).

While St. John's image of the City's division into three parts is clearly taken from Ezekiel, the specific referent may be the division of besieged Jerusalem into three factions, each struggling fiercely and violently for dominance. Scholars have often observed that this factionalism proved to be the downfall of the city; she was betrayed and destroyed through her divisions.

One important indication that the Great City is Jerusalem is the fact that in this verse St. John distinguishes her from "the cities of the Gentiles," which

fell with her. Jerusalem, we must remember, was the capital city of the Kingdom of priests, the place of the Temple; within her walls sacrifices and prayers were offered up for all nations. The Old Covenant system was a *world-order*, the foundation on which the whole world was organized and maintained in stability. She covenantally represented all the nations of the world, and in her fall they collapsed. (The new organization of the world is based on the New Jerusalem, built on the Rock and "multicentralized" throughout the world.)

Thus "Babylon the Great [cf. Revelation 14:8] was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath." In this judgment every false refuge disappears: the mountains and rocks no longer can hide the wicked "from the face of Him who sits on the Throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb" (cf. Revelation 6:16). "Every island fled away, and the mountains were not found" (Revelation 16:20).

We have already noticed that Revelation and the prophecy of Ezekiel share some common themes. Here again there is a parallel: Ezekiel declared that Jerusalem's false prophets would bring on her destruction by a violent hailstorm (Ezekiel 13:1-16). St. John foretells the same fate: "And huge hailstones, about the weight of a talent [100 lbs.], came down from heaven upon men; and the men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, because its plague is extremely severe" (Revelation 16:21). As with the other plagues, the imagery is borrowed from the plagues that Moses brought upon Egypt (in

this case, the seventh plague: Exodus 9:18-26). The plague of hailstones also calls up associations with “the large stones from heaven” that God threw down upon the Canaanites when the Land was being conquered under Joshua (Joshua 10:11); as Deborah sang, the very stars of heaven make war against the enemies of God (Judges 5:20).

A specific historical referent of this “hailstorm” may have been recorded by Josephus, in his strange account of the huge stone missiles thrown by the Roman catapults into the city: “The stone missiles weighed a talent and traveled two furlongs or more, and their impact not only on those who were hit first, but also on those behind them, was enormous. At first the Jews kept watch for the stone—for it was white—and its approach was intimated to the eye by its shining surface as well as to the ear by its whizzing sound. Watchmen posted on the towers gave the warnings whenever the engine was fired and the stone came hurtling toward them, shouting in their native tongue: ‘*The Son is coming!*’ Those in the line of fire made way and fell prone, a precaution that resulted in the stone’s passing harmlessly through and falling in their rear. To frustrate this, it occurred to the Romans to blacken the stones so that they could not be seen so easily beforehand; then they hit their target and destroyed many with a single shot’” (*The Jewish War*, v. vi. 3).

After considering various theories about the meaning of this phrase, commentator J. Stuart Russell observed: “It could not but be well known to the Jews that the great hope and faith of the Chris-

tians was the speedy coming of the Son. It was about this very time, according to Hegesippus, that St. James, the brother of our Lord, publicly testified in the temple that 'the Son of Man was about to come in the clouds of heaven,' and then sealed his testimony with his blood. It seems highly probable that the Jews, in their defiant and desperate blasphemy, when they saw the white mass hurtling through the air, raised the ribald cry, 'The Son is coming,' in mockery of the Christian hope of the Parousia, to which they might trace a ludicrous resemblance in the strange appearance of the missile" (*The Parousia*, p. 482).

Again "the men blasphemed God"—their consistent reaction throughout the pouring out of the Chalices, revealing not only their wickedness but their downright stupidity: when hundred-pound stones are falling from heaven, it is surely the wrong time to commit blasphemy! But God has abandoned these men to their own self-destruction; their vicious, hateful rebellion consumes them to such a degree that they can depart into eternity with curses on their lips.

The Chalices containing "the last of the plagues" have been poured out; but the end is not yet. The rest of St. John's prophecy closes in on the destruction of the great Harlot-City of Jerusalem and her allies, and concludes with the revelation of the glorious Bride of Christ: the true Holy City, New Jerusalem. (Revelation 17-22 may therefore be considered a continuation of the seventh Chalice, or an exposition of its meaning; in any case, the events are

clearly governed by the angels of the Chalice; see 17:1; 21:9.)

In his fascinating study of *The Early Days of Christianity* (p. 557), F. W. Farrar draws this conclusion about the Book of Revelation: "The whole book from beginning to end teaches the great truths—Christ shall triumph! Christ's enemies shall be overcome! They who hate him shall be destroyed; they who love him shall be blessed unspeakably. The doom alike of Jew and of Gentile is already imminent. On Judea and Jerusalem, on Rome and her Empire, on Nero and his adorers, the judgment shall fall. Sword and fire, and famine and pestilence, and storm and earthquake, and social agony and political terror are nothing but the woes which are ushering in the Messianic reign. Old things are rapidly passing away. The light upon the visage of the old dispensation is vanishing and fading into dimness, but the face of Him who is as the sun is already dawning through the East. The new and final covenant is instantly to be established amid terrible judgments; and it is to be so established as to render impossible the continuance of the Old. Maranatha! The Lord is at hand! Even so come, Lord Jesus!"

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PUBLISHER'S EPILOGUE

by Gary North

And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt. Salt is good: but if the salt have lost its saltiness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another (Mark 9:47-50).

The Great Tribulation is a book about God's judgment. It may not be the judgment that you had in mind when you bought it. Whatever kind of biblical events that you associate with the word "judgment," or the words "great tribulation," never forget as you read this book that these earthly judgments are nothing compared to the eternal judgment that Jesus said is coming at the end of time. They are "earnests"—down payments—on God's holy wrath in eternity.

Actually, our use of language is misleading when

we speak of God's judgment exclusively as punishment. In the Bible, judgment is two-fold: *blessing* and *cursing*. We see this in the final judgment. At the final judgment, after the resurrection of all humanity, God will judge men. He judges between men: "sheep" to one side and "goats" to the other (Matt. 25:33). (I hope there is no one reading this book who is so "literalistic" that he believes that Jesus was talking about literal sheep and literal goats. Literalism has its limits. The Bible is filled with symbols, which you should bear in mind as you read this book. Jesus was talking about people, not animals. You and I will be there at that great division.) That great final division leads to two different eternal states:

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. . . . Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:34, 41).

There will be eternally *blessed* people and eternally *cursed* people. Each group goes to its respective everlasting "resting" place, though there is no rest for the wicked. In fact, the two places can be defined in terms of rest: *ethical* rest for those who live in God's kingdom forever, and zero ethical rest for those who live (exist) in the second death of the lake of fire.

The second death is the ultimate and everlasting curse. It is living death, meaning spiritual death

with the sensation of pain. The Bible speaks of the worst pain imaginable: fire. "And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death" (Rev. 20:14). This is not annihilation, as several cults teach. It is not oblivion. It is not non-existence. Those condemned to the lake of eternal fire would gladly exchange their everlasting bodies for mere oblivion. Oblivion would mean an escape from the everlasting agonies of God's curse, the longed-for silence of God. But God is not silent. Sinners in hell and later in the lake of fire are never given this opportunity to silence God. Sin has everlasting consequences. It is God's final judgment that will mark forever the blessed and the cursed, the living and the dead, the covenant-keepers and the covenant-breakers, the Christians and the non-Christians.

Note that the Bible teaches that both the post-resurrection kingdom of God and the place of everlasting torment were created from the foundation of the world. The kingdom of God was created for redeemed people, while the lake of fire was created for the devil and his angels, though God opens it up for human covenant-breakers (Matt. 25:41). The lake of fire is marked by something called "the worm." We do not know what this is, but we know what it isn't. It is not a fallen angel, for the fallen angels are rendered eternally impotent, too. The worm is not human conscience, for there is no sense of voluntary submission before God and His law. Covenant-breakers remain covenant breakers forever. The worm may be gnawing regret that men are not God. What we do know is that it never dies. And

if it never dies, then its victims never enter into the cultists' hoped-for peace of eternal oblivion. The worm torments condemned covenant-breakers forever.

This book is about earthly judgment. What is coming in eternity has been previewed on earth: blessings and cursings. The great tribulation was (*not* "will be") an event in history that reflected in some small measure the horror of the future cursing to come. Compared to the lake of fire, the great tribulation was a brief, minor discomfort for a handful of people. Nevertheless, compared with God's conditional covenant blessings to His chosen people, the Jews—blessings that were revoked in 70 A.D.—the great tribulation was a world-changing catastrophe. This book is about that catastrophe.

Equal Ultimacy: Blessing and Cursing

God's judgments come in history and also at the resurrection of the dead. This brings us to a fundamental doctrine of the Bible, one which in our day is rarely mentioned, even by pastors and theologians (*especially* by theologians): the equal ultimacy of blessings and cursings. In common language, this is sometimes expressed as the equal ultimacy of heaven and hell, but this phrase is incorrect. Heaven and hell are not the final standard, because they are incomplete places historically. People do not have their bodies in heaven and hell. They are reunited with their bodies at the last judgment. This means that people are resurrected from both heaven and hell. We have to conclude then, that heaven is not

yet perfect, for people do not possess their perfect resurrected bodies. It is yet incomplete. Also, in the days of John, they cried out for God to bring His judgment, another mark of incompleteness: "And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth" (Rev. 8:10). God's blessings in heaven are historically incomplete.

Similarly, hell is a place of comparative grace, if we are comparing hell to the lake of fire. In hell, people do not possess perfect bodies to burn eternally, only souls. God's cursing on them is therefore limited. Furthermore, Jesus' story of the rich man who dies and goes to hell indicates that there is some sort of communication between those in hell and at least one person in heaven, "Father Abraham" (Luke 16:23-31). God's cursings in hell are therefore historically incomplete. After the final judgment, there is no more limited, "low temperature," body-free, hell fire. There is also no more communication with anyone in the kingdom of God. The last traces of grace in history are removed from the cursed, when hell, the devil, his angels, and resurrected non-Christians are all ceremoniously dumped into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14), just as the final absence of grace in history is removed from the saints when they depart from heaven and bodily enter the restored New Heaven and New Earth. At that point and forever more, those in hell can think back to *the comparative comforts of hell* and correctly say of God, "No more Mr. Nice Guy."

Neither Christians nor non-Christians like to think about such things. This does not make these future events less real or less inevitable.

Equal Ultimacy, Unequal Results

One possible source of confusion needs to be cleared up. I have said that blessing and cursing are equally ultimate. I am referring to *covenantal ultimacy in judgment*, not historical ultimacy. Good and evil are not equally powerful over time. God's blessings strengthen His covenant-keepers, while His cursings weaken covenant-breakers. God's promise to Eve of the coming seed (Gen. 3:15) was more powerful than all of Satan's attempts to destroy the covenant line. Noah's ark was more powerful than the Flood. The exodus was more powerful than Egyptian slavery. The resurrection of Christ was more powerful than the cross. The Church became visibly more powerful than Israel after 70 A.D. Christianity is more powerful in principle than humanism, and this will eventually be manifested in history. Long-term power comes from covenant-keeping: conformity to God's law through the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Long-term impotence comes from covenant-breaking: disobedience to God's law through the empowering of Satan. (See my book, *Dominion and Common Grace: The Biblical Basis of Progress*; Box 8000, Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987: \$8.95.)

Heaven and hell are equally ultimate as places. They are equally ultimate *covenantally*. Hell as a place of God's wrath is equally ultimate to heaven as a

place of God's blessing, and both hell and heaven are limited by history. God makes His declaration of "lost" to those in hell, just as He declares "saved" to those in heaven. Hell is no less real than heaven; it is simply impotent compared to heaven. Death is equally ultimate to life covenantally. In fact, life and death are primarily covenantal concepts, not physical concepts, as we shall see. They exist in relation to God's covenant. Life and death must always be defined in terms of God's five-point covenant structure, a structure described best in Ray Sutton's book, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant* (Box 8000, Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987; \$14.95):

1. The transcendence (yet also presence) of God
2. The hierarchy of God's creation
3. The law of God
4. The judgment (sanctions) of God
5. The inheritance (or disinheritance) of God

Heaven and hell are limited by time and by their relation to events on earth. The two post-resurrection worlds will not be limited by time. God's grace will shine forth perfectly in one place, and His wrath will shine forth perfectly in the other. There is no escape from God in history: "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there" (Ps. 139:7-8). How much more is God present in eternal judgment, in both the place of unrestrained blessing and

the place of unrestrained cursing! The presence of God is eternal; hence, once created, human beings are creatures of endless future duration. Many people will wish they weren't everlasting. For those in the lake of fire, endless duration is the opposite of eternal life: it is the eternal second death.

The Bible speaks here of God's presence in the sense of knowing and observing all things, determining all things. It is not speaking of His presence in the sense of *ethical* presence: showing grace (common grace or saving grace) to people. That kind of presence will not exist in the lake of fire. The residents of the lake of fire are separated from God eternally, not in the sense that men can escape God's presence, but in the sense that they cannot pray to God, seek God's face, or expect God's mercy. He is present with them in some sense as He was present in the burning bush: as *a consuming fire*. He is present in some sense as the worm that never dies. (It is not Satan or a fallen angel that serves as the worm, for they are equally impotent, equally under the curse.) He is present because God is omnipresent: present everywhere. This very presence as the Judge is the ultimate curse of God: no ethical presence with people as the Savior and source of grace. They spend eternity in the presence of God's wrath, not God's grace.

The key issue here, as always, is ethics. Life is a function of covenantal ethics, not duration as such. So is death. Life is a gift of God's grace, an unmitigated blessing: "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth

on him" (John 3:36). Covenant-breakers have *existence* on earth, but not life: they shall not see life, meaning covenantal life, Jesus said. They will have the same existence in the lake of fire: they shall not see life. *Life is ethical*, not simply a function of physical perception. Those in ethical rebellion against God are ethically dead. They do not possess life.

It is the devil's own lie that mere physical perception is life, and that physical death is the end of life. It is also his lie that physically dead men will not have perception, especially the perception of incomparable, inconceivable pain. In non-physical hell and also in the eternally physical lake of fire, dead men will have perception. What they would give not to have it! Nothing, in this case, would be so much better than something.

Accept the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Calvary as your lawful substitute in the eyes of God. Entertain no false hope of a world of nothing beyond the grave. Sinners deserve a lot more than nothing.

Taking Christ's Suffering Seriously

Because people seldom consider the eternal reality of the lake of fire, they do not fully understand or take seriously the cosmic and eternal implications of the sufferings of the Son of God at Calvary. "A big deal, yes, but not *that* big a deal," they think to themselves. They do not take God's law seriously. They do not take God's eternal judgment seriously. This, of course, is precisely what sin is all about: *not taking God seriously*.

What of those who refuse to accept Christ's sacrificial work as their substitute? Their fate is the same as those in the Old Testament era who refused during their life on earth to accept the representative roasting of animals on God's altar. Remember, there are no bulls and goats to take their place. They themselves will replace the bulls and goats on God's eternal altar. Not yet. They are enjoying—compared to what is in store for them after the final judgment—a brief respite in hell. After the final judgment, things will at last and forever get *really* hot for them, body and soul, "where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." They will look back fondly at hell as a place of God's restrained cursing. Hell will be thought of as a place of comparative rest and recreation. The Soviet Union's Gulag concentration camp system will be remembered by its covenant-breaking victims as a positive paradise.

There is no purgatory for sinners. Nothing purges the consequences of sin after the sinner has died. Hell is the sinner's only "purgatory," in the sense of a place of *temporarily* restricted cursing. Hell's function is comparable to that of a prison in a biblical commonwealth: a holding place until the final sentence is handed down. It is better there than in the courtroom of the judge, and surely better than in the place of execution—eternal execution.

The Salt of God's Covenant

Salt is symbolic of judgment in the Bible. Remember, judgment is two-fold: blessing and curs-

ing. Therefore, salt is for both blessing and cursing.

We know from the language of the New Testament that salt is a blessing, for Christians are described as salt. "Salt is good: but if the salt have lost its saltiness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another" (Mark 9:50). Again, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and be trodden under foot of men" (Matt. 5:13). Obviously, salt does not lose its savor, but it can be mixed with other substances and become tasteless or bitter. This is what sin does to something good. When good men become corrupt, they are fit for cursing in history, to be "trodden underfoot." They become good for nothing.

What about cursing? The first example is Lot's wife. She looked back toward the plain where Sodom and Gomorrah were being subjected to God's fiery judgment. God turned her into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26). Why salt? Because in God's sacrificial system, salt always accompanies judgment. "And every oblation of thy meat offering shalt thou season with salt; neither shalt thou suffer the salt of the covenant of thy God to be lacking from thy meat offering: with all thine offerings thou shalt offer salt" (Lev. 2:13). Here we find the phrase, "the salt of the covenant of thy God." God in a sense flavors His covenantal judgments with salt. Salt is good. It is a blessing. Covenant-keepers are the salt of the earth in history.

But if we mix our salt with corruption, as Lot's wife did, then we become covenantally dead salt, corrupted salt, and useless to God.

Salt was a required aspect of God's sacrificial system.

And on the second day thou shalt offer a kid of the goats without blemish for a sin offering; and they shall cleanse the altar, as they did cleanse it with the bullock. When thou hast made an end of cleansing it, thou shalt offer a young bullock without blemish, and a ram out of thy flock without blemish. And thou shalt offer them before the LORD, and *the priests shall cast salt upon them*, and they shall offer them up for a burnt offering unto the LORD (Ezek. 43:22-24).

There must always be salt on the altar. Christians are that salt. In their sin-free resurrected bodies, they will serve as eternal salt for God's eternal altar. There will always be a sacrifice on that altar, just as surely as there will always be a Church, God's holy salt. On that fiery altar judgment will burn for as long as the Church shall exist. There can be no acceptable sacrifices without salt. God will not tolerate salt-free sacrifices. He will preserve His Church, for He will always preserve His altar. His law is perpetual, His justice is perpetual, and His judgment is everlasting, both blessings and cursings.

Salt is also used as a destroyer in history. It not only adds flavor, it also kills, and *kills "forever."* It was used in the ancient world as a means of destroying an enemy city, for salting over a city's agricultural area destroyed its future productivity. "And Abimelech fought against the city all that day, and slew the people that was therein, and beat down the city, and sowed it with salt" (Jud. 9:45). God salted over Sodom and Gomorrah, and later other cities. Why? To preserve His covenant. Chilton reproduces this passage in its entirety in *The Days of Vengeance* in relation to the Temple's sacrifices. He does so in his introductory remarks to the book's section on God's covenant sanctions (p. 226):

And the LORD shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the law: So the generation to come of your children that shall rise up after you, and the stranger that shall come from a far land, shall say, when they see the plagues of that land, and the sickness which the LORD hath laid upon it; And the whole land thereof is brimstone, and salt, and burning, that it is not sown, nor beareth, nor any grass groweth therein, like the overthrow of Sodom, and Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboim, which the LORD overthrew in his anger, and in his wrath: Even all nations shall say, Wherefore hath the LORD done thus unto this land? What meaneth

the heat of this great anger? Then men shall say, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them forth out of the land of Egypt: For they went and served other gods, and worshipped them, gods whom they knew not, and whom he had not given unto them. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against this land, to bring upon it all the curses that are written in this book (Deut. 29:21-27).

The phrases of cursing are temperature-oriented: "the whole land thereof is brimstone, and salt, and burning"; "the heat of this great anger"; "the anger of the LORD was kindled against this land." It is totally misleading to speak of God's judgments in history apart from the language of fire. But it is also misleading to speak of God's judgmental fire without salt. Salt is the savor of judgment. Thus the presence of the Church in history is the savor of judgment in history. God's covenant sanctions are two-fold: blessing and cursing.

What is true of God's covenant cursings in history is equally true of His covenant cursings in eternity. The lake of fire is the place "where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt." The New Heaven and the New Earth is as assured of its eternal status as the lake of fire is, and vice versa. God's covenant sanctions never end.

Covenantal Death and the Baptism of Fire

Death is a covenantal phenomenon. God told Adam that he would die on the day that he ate of the forbidden fruit. Adam ate and died. He died *covenantally*. God's covenant sanctions of cursing were placed on him. He did not die physically (a sign of God's grace to him in history), although his body definitively died that day. It bore marks of the curse: sweat on the brow (Gen. 3:19). This same mark of the curse was not allowed for the high priest, which is why he was required to wear the mitre on his head and was also required to wear linen (Ex. 29:38-43). We are specifically told in Ezekiel's vision that the high priest was required to wear linen in order to avoid sweating (Ezek. 44:18). Adam's body progressively died through the aging process for over nine centuries; then it finally died (Gen. 5:5). He could not escape God's covenant sanction of cursing.

This physical death is only the first death. There is a second death, the post-resurrection death after the final judgment (Rev. 20:14). Why is this second death required? Because *covenant-breaking*, if it is persisted in until the day of the first death, becomes a *permanent condition*. The covenant of God is eternal. Therefore, one's position and condition as a covenant-breaker or a covenant-keeper becomes permanent at the death of the pre-resurrection body. If people could escape their position as covenant-breakers in eternity through any means, including annihilation, they could therefore eliminate the per-

manence of God's covenant sanctions. God does not permit such an attack on His sovereignty in time and eternity. His sanctions never end, for His covenant never ends.

Kline's Exposition of the Ritual Sanctions

These covenant sanctions are two-fold sanctions: cursings and blessings. This two-fold nature of the covenant sanctions is spelled out in great detail by Meredith G. Kline in his book, *By Oath Consigned* (Eerdmans, 1968). Kline refers to John the Baptizer's summary of Christ's ministry: "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire" (Matt. 3:11). What did John have in mind, "baptizing with fire"? Kline cites Malachi 4:1: "For behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, it shall leave them neither root nor branch." Stubble cannot grow. It cannot send roots into the soil for nourishment, nor grow leaves on branches to absorb sunlight. Without root and branches, stubble dies, dries, and is easily set afire.

But there is another source of light than the burning of stubble, as Malachi 4:2-3 says: "But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings: and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under your

feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the LORD of hosts."

What are Malachi's next words? A call to remember God's covenant law. "Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments" (v. 4). Then is promised John's own ministry: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD" (v. 5). Kline comments: "For evildoers the fire of that day is the burning of an oven to consume them, but for those who fear God's name it is the healing rays of the sun to refine them" (p. 58). John's baptism "was not an ordinance to be observed by Israel in their generations but a special sign for that terminal generation epitomizing the particular crisis in covenant history represented by the mission of John as messenger of the Lord's ultimatum" (p. 61).

Viewed from a more comprehensive vantage point, John's baptism was a sign of the ordeal through which Israel must pass to receive a judgment of either curse or blessing. . . . By his message and baptism John thus proclaimed again to the seed of Abraham the meaning of their circumcision. Circumcision was no guarantee of inviolable privilege. It was a sign of the divine ordeal in which the axe, laid unto the roots of the unfruitful trees cursed by Messiah, would cut them off (Matt. 3:10; Lk. 3:9). John's baptism was in effect a recircumcising (p. 62).

Kline concludes: "Baptism, then, is concerned with man in the presence of God's judgment throne" (p. 67). Baptism is a covenant sign, and it bears the mark of the two-fold nature of covenant sanctions: blessing and cursing. This system of dual covenant sanctions will be manifested at the final judgment:

Again, when the Lord appears in the final ordeal theophany as the Judge of the quick [living] and the dead, taking fiery vengeance on them that obey not the gospel, he will bring before his judgment throne all who have been within his church of the New Covenant. There his declaration of the curse of the covenant will fall on the ears of some who in this world have been within the community that formally owns his covenant lordship, so that still in that day they think to cry, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?" . . . There is, therefore, a fulfillment of the covenant lordship of Christ over his New Testament church unto condemnation and death as well as unto justification and life. In the execution of both verdicts, whether unto life or unto death, the New Covenant will be enforced and perfected (pp. 77-78).

Permanent Sanctions

The New covenant is *enforced and perfected* in God's final judgment. That future judgment is as permanent as the covenant itself. The sanctions of blessing

and cursing are everlasting. The terminal generation of Israel did not understand the threat to them. They ignored John's baptism. They did not take baptism seriously as a permanent (eternal) covenant sign. They did not heed John's warning of the supreme ability of the One who followed him to impose the baptism of permanent consuming fire. Thus, when they crucified Christ, they sealed their fate. The day of the Lord came in A.D. 70 and visibly destroyed the Temple and its animal sacrifices. The final day of the Lord will come and institute the only sacrifice that in principle God ever honored: true, complete, and permanent judgment.

Is God's blessing ultimate? Yes: the resurrection of the blemish-free bodies of saints to be merged with their souls newly released from heaven, and their post-judgment transfer to their new permanent environment: the perfected New Heaven and New Earth. Is God's cursing ultimate? Yes: the resurrection the blemish-free bodies of dead sinners to be merged with their souls newly released from hell, and their post-judgment transfer to their new permanent environment: the lake of fire. God curses them with perfect resurrected bodies to serve as eternal stubble, that they may endure eternal agony in the lake of fire.

Covenantal death is permanent, after the death of the body. Covenantal death is as permanent as the covenant itself. Therefore,

if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with

one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt. Salt is good: but if the salt have lost its saltiness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another (Mark 9:47-50).

Those who argue for anything other than eternal judgment have adopted what philosophers call nominalism: "Hell is just a name, not a real place," or "the lake of fire is simply symbolic language, not a real place." This is what modern theological liberalism argues. So do the cults, with their doctrine of annihilationism. But hell and the lake of fire are real places, for they play eternal roles in God's covenant. They are covenantal realities, not verbal symbols of God's wrath—a "wrath without wrath." Hell is as real as heaven; the lake of fire is as real as the post-resurrection New Heaven and New Earth. They are so real, that they have manifestations in history.

Heaven and Hell on Earth

Chilton's *Days of Vengeance* has a chapter titled, "All Hell Breaks Loose." On page 257, he cites Herbert Schlossberg's *Idols for Destruction* (Thomas Nelson, 1983): "When a civilization turns idolatrous, its people are profoundly changed by that experience. In a kind of reverse sanctification, the idolater is transformed into the likeness of the object of his worship. Israel 'went after worthlessness, and be-

came worthless' (Jer. 2:5)."

This is a brilliant observation. But Schlossberg stops short of the goal. This is not "a *kind* of reverse sanctification"; this *is* reverse sanctification. Covenant-keepers progressively work out the implications of their faith in history, manifesting the heavenly kingdom of God in time and on earth. God progressively answers the required prayer: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). This is *progressive sanctification*: the working out in history of the perfect moral righteousness of Christ's perfect humanity (not His divinity) that God imputes to Christians at the point of their salvation. What God imputes to us definitively in principle at the point of our conversion to Christ—the mind and righteousness of Jesus Christ—we are to manifest progressively over time.

Schlossberg's point is that Satan's followers manifest a parallel process of sanctification. To "sanctify" means to set apart. Satan sets his followers apart in the same way that God does. They are to work out in history the evil covenant principles of Satan's hellish kingdom, just as Christians are to work out in history the righteous covenant principles of God's heavenly kingdom.

There is a constant complaint by those who hold eschatologies of earthly defeat that it is foolish to work for the establishment of God's law on earth. They call such a view "utopian." They deny that there can ever be a widespread manifestation of God's kingdom on earth in history. They dismiss such a vision as totally false, "looking for heaven on

earth." Yet to refuse to work to bring heaven on earth by teaching people to obey heaven's righteous *principles* on earth is to turn history over to the devil. His disciples are working hard to bring hell on earth by teaching people to obey hell's rebellious principles on earth.

There is a war going on. It is a war between God and Satan, righteousness and evil, covenant-keepers and covenant-breakers, *heaven and hell*. This war is going on *in history*. It is an earthly war primarily. The ultimate issue over which the war is being fought is the issue of sovereignty. Who is sovereign, God or Satan? The historical issue is also being fought over the issue of sovereignty: Whose human forces will triumph in history, God's or Satan's? Whose New World Order will be victorious in history, Christ's or Satan's? In short, the war is being fought over this question: Heaven on earth or hell on earth?

There is no possibility of any other kingdom on earth. There is no possibility of neutral man's kingdom on earth, operated by hypothetical neutral natural law. Men are never neutral, and there is no such thing as natural law. There is God's law, and there are Satan's numerous alternatives, including "neutral" natural law. *There is no neutrality*. Therefore, we face the question: Will it be heaven on earth or hell on earth? Will it be God's covenant law as the law of nations, or one or more of Satan's counterfeit law systems? Any attempt to substitute a third choice, such as natural law, is simply another attempt to replace God's covenant law with Satan's. It is simply another attempt to build hell on earth.

Sadly, pessimistic Christians who expect little but defeat for God's people cling to faith in natural law as a neutral common ground between Satan's supposedly expanding influence in history and the church's supposedly decreasing influence. They see God's Bible-revealed law as a threat to their retreat from historic responsibility, so they choose to preach an undefined (and always undefinable) "neutral natural law" which lays no uniquely Christian civic responsibilities on them.

Conclusion

The judgment of God on Israel in A.D. 70 should persuade us of the futility of escaping God's progressive judgments in history. In our day, potentially the greatest blessings since Pentecost are facing us: worldwide revival, the information revolution of computerization, and a rediscovery of God's revealed law as a tool of godly dominion (Gen. 1:26-28). In our day, also potentially the worst curses since the fall of Jerusalem are facing us: biological terrorism that would kill millions of residents in a large city or cities, nuclear terrorism, or an attack on the west's telecommunications systems. We need to understand God's judgment. It involves blessing and cursing.

God's blessing is *definitive*: the grace of salvation in Christ. His blessings are also *progressive*: promise of the coming seed (Gen. 3:15) and His provision of clothing for them, Noah's ark, the exodus from Egypt, the return to the land under Nehemiah and Ezra, the resurrection of Christ, and the expansion

of the Church. God's blessing is also *final and eternal*: the sin-free culmination of the post-resurrection New Heaven and the New Earth.

God's curse is *definitive*: the death of mankind. His curses are also *progressive*: the cursing of Adam and Eve and their environment, casting them out of the garden, the Flood, slavery in Egypt, captivity in Assyria and Babylon, the death of Christ on the cross, and the fall of Jerusalem. God's cursing is also *final and eternal*: the lake of fire.

As the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) puts it, regarding eternal blessing and eternal cursing, beginning at judgment day:

The end of God's appointing this day is for the manifestation of the glory of His mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of His justice, in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient. For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fulness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the presence of the Lord: but the wicked, who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power. (Chapter XXXIII: II)

Everlasting joy or everlasting torment: we must preach the *equal ultimacy of blessing and cursing in eternity*. To refuse to do so is to abandon biblical cove-

nant theology. It is to fudge orthodox Christianity. Let Israel's experience in A.D. 70 be our guide to the importance of faithfulness to God's revealed Word. If we are so careless and arrogant as to deny the eternal reality of God's cursings, we risk having to experience them first-hand. "Learning by doing" is not what you want in *this* lesson in theology.