

“The Place Called Armageddon”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 23

Texts: Revelation 16:1-21; Zechariah 14:1-9

One of the most frightening images in all the Book of Revelation is that of a great and final battle, known as the Battle of Armageddon. Yes, such a battle is indeed coming, but it has little to do with what most people have been led to expect. Armageddon is not about the modern nation of Israel, nor does it take place on the plains of Megiddo. John’s reference to Armageddon is instead connected to the final eschatological battle between Christ and the dragon, that day when Satan turns his full wrath upon the church, only to find himself crushed by Jesus Christ and cast into the lake of fire.

We now enter the latter part of this book and we will focus upon the bowl judgments of Revelation 16, before taking several weeks to deal with John’s account of the destruction of the harlot—in Revelation 17-18—who has seduced the nations of the world with her wealth and power.

We have completed that section of Revelation which runs from chapter 12-14 and which includes the account of the woman (Israel), the dragon (Satan), the beast (the state), the false prophet (who promotes worship of the state), the 144,000 (the church), the three angels who announce God’s judgment to the world, and the Son of Man, who stands triumphantly in the midst of his people on the heavenly Mount Zion.

This section is very closely linked to the bowl judgments of chapter 16. As we saw last time, Revelation 15 serves as a kind of literary bridge between the return of Jesus Christ at the time of the great harvest and the bowl judgments which are in some way associated with that harvest. As John says in Revelation 15:1, “*with them [the bowl judgments] God’s wrath is completed.*” Therefore, the bowl judgments are especially connected to the end of the age.

Throughout this series, I have been using the analogy of camera angles mentioned by Dennis Johnson throughout his fine commentary on Revelation, the *Triumph of the Lamb*. This is a very helpful way to understand the series of repeating visions in Revelation, which are indeed similar to different camera angles focusing on the same event.

The first cycle of judgment in Revelation 6:1-8:1—the seal judgments—covers the entire period of time between Christ’s first advent and second coming, before culminating in the sixth seal, which is the return of the Lord. The series of seal judgments brings death and destruction upon one fourth of the earth’s inhabitants and demonstrates the Lamb’s authority to bring judgment upon the earth.

The second cycle of judgment—the trumpet judgments of Revelation 8-11—likewise runs its course throughout the entire inter-advental period, but is more intense than the seal judgments. Mirroring the plagues which came upon Egypt, the trumpet judgments will bring death and destruction to one third of the earth’s inhabitants. This cycle also culminates with the return of Jesus Christ at the seventh trumpet, when the city of man—Babylon the Great—is destroyed, just as Jericho, which blocked Israel’s entrance into the promised land, was destroyed in the days of Joshua. For the city of man blocks the establishment of the New Jerusalem, which John says in Revelation 20, is even now coming down from heaven.

But the bowl judgments of Revelation 16, are by far the most intense of the three cycles of judgment

found in this book, for these judgments bring destruction upon the entire world. Commentators are divided as to the question of whether or not the bowl judgments are a cyclical series of judgments which run throughout the entire inter-advental period,¹ or whether they are limited to the time of the end and our Lord's return.² Here is where the camera angle analogy is very helpful. If the seal judgments present a wide angle view of the inter-advental period, and if the camera angle afforded by the trumpet judgments is more narrowly focused, then what we see with the bowl judgments would be a close-up upon the events associated with the return of Jesus Christ, specifically that of the sixth seal and seventh trumpet.

Whether or not these judgments occur throughout the entire inter-advental period is not as important as the fact that in this chapter, John is setting forth what will happen to the earth and its unbelieving inhabitants when Jesus Christ comes again at the end of the age, to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. No one or no thing will escape. By the time the bowl judgments have run their course, God's wrath against sin and unbelief will be complete.

As we turn to our text in Revelation 16:1-21, there are two main features to notice. The first thing to notice is the way in which these judgments echo the judgments which came upon Egypt and the wicked Pharaoh, and the other is the great intensity of these judgments which far surpasses anything we have seen in Revelation so far.

Since Revelation 15 serves as a bridge between the vision of Revelation 12-14 and Revelation 16 it is important to recall that each of the cycles of judgment (the seals, the trumpets and the bowls), begins from the vantage point of the heavenly throne. In doing this, the point is made repeatedly that God's will is presently being done in heaven. But as a result of these judgments, God's will one day will be done upon the earth.

But there is something very frightening about this cycle, for once the bowls of judgment have been poured out upon the earth, God's wrath will be complete, it will extend to all the earth and all of its inhabitants. This, of course, means that the return of Jesus Christ is the day of final judgment, a point which is very problematic for premillennarians, who believe that the final judgment does not occur until the thousand years (the millennium) are over.

The series of the bowl judgments begins when John says "*then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, 'Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth.'*" The loud voice comes from the temple, indicating that everything which is about to happen will take place according to God's plans and instruction.³ This is moment that those before the throne crying out, "how long O Lord," have been so anxiously awaiting. The time has come for God to pour out his wrath upon all those who reject the gospel of Jesus Christ, who persecute his church, and who defile the heavens and the earth with their idolatry. As God brought the Pharaoh to his knees so that Israel could begin the journey to the promised land, so now God will bring the world to its end, establish the new heavens and earth so that his people will enter the heavenly city and receive their promised inheritance.

¹ Beale, Revelation, 803.

² Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 223.

³ Poythress, The Returning King, 155.

Notice that throughout this series of judgments, God's wrath is now focused directly upon those who have worshiped the beast and taken his mark upon the back of their hands or their foreheads. "*The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image.*" When the first trumpet judgment sounds, God's wrath is poured out upon the earth itself, the trees and the grass. But this time, judgment falls directly upon the earth's unbelieving inhabitants.

Like the painful boils and sores of the sixth plague which came upon Egypt (cf. Exodus 9:8-12), so too, this particular judgment uses apocalyptic imagery to make an important redemptive-historical point. God seals those who are his and protects them from his wrath. But those who have taken the Mark of the Beast will find their master now powerless to protect them from the plague sent by God.⁴ Just as the magicians of Egypt could not protect the Pharaoh nor his people, so now the mark of the beast not only fails to protect those who serve the dragon, it actually identifies them as objects of God's wrath. And all those bearing the number of man—666—will suffer beyond measure.

Likewise, the second bowl includes a number of powerful biblical images. Echoing the first plague upon Egypt, when the water of the great Nile turned into blood, we read in Revelation 8:8-9, "*The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.*" In verse 3 of Revelation 16, we read of the second bowl judgment, "*The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea died.*" Whereas in the second trumpet of Revelation 8, a third of the sea had been turned to blood, now God strikes dead every living creature in the oceans. Nothing survives. The domain of the dragon is smitten at the time of judgment. According to Revelation 21:1, in the new heaven and earth, there is no more sea, that place of storm and tempest which is the symbolic realm of the dragon.

According to verse 4, "*The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood.*" God had turned all of Egypt's water to blood. In the third trumpet judgment, God makes one third of the waters of the earth bitter, bringing sickness or death upon those who drink it. Now God fouls all the waters of the earth, symbolic of the fact that God's judgment now extends even to the sources of life. But what is perhaps most interesting about this judgment is the response it elicits from the angel who carries it out. *Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say: 'You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged; for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.'*"

There are loud echoes here from Deuteronomy 32:4, when, just before entering Moab prior to Israel's conquest of Canaan, Moses proclaims of YHWH: "*He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.*" God's judgments are altogether righteous. For those who have shed the blood of the saints, will now be forced to drink their own blood—an apocalyptic symbol of how God's just punishment perfectly fits the crime, as seen in Isaiah 49:26, where the prophet declares concerning God's judgment, "*I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh; they will be drunk on their own blood, as with wine. Then all mankind will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.*" Recall that in Revelation 14:10, John

⁴ Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 225.

describes a scene in which the blood of God's enemies would flow the length and breadth of Israel.⁵ Upon witnessing the righteous nature of this judgment, we read of the heavenly response from the suffering saints in verse 7, "*And I heard the altar respond: `Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.`"* God will avenge his suffering servants, and heaven resounds with praise to God, when the day of final retribution comes, news of great comfort to a suffering and persecuted church.

According to Revelation 8:12, when the fourth trumpet sounds, the light of the sun, the moon and the stars will be diminished by a third. But the fourth bowl judgment results not in diminished light, but in a massive intensification of the sun's heat. According to verse 8, "*the fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him.*"

Lest we forget the significance of this particular judgment, we need to recall to mind the words of Revelation 7:16, describing an earlier vision of the saints in heaven: "*Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat.*" The point is that God's people are protected from his wrath, while those who serve the dragon curse God, refuse to repent or give God glory, despite the ferocity of his judgment. So deep are the effects of sin upon the human heart, so thoroughly have the beast and the false prophets deceived the world's inhabitants that they curse their creator even while his judgment is being poured out upon them.

The fifth bowl judgment also echoes the ninth plague upon Egypt, which is darkness. We read in verse 10: "*The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.*" Earlier in Revelation 2, we read of Satan's throne being in Pergamum, a symbolic reference to the prevalence of pagan temples and false religion centered in the area. One of the saints there, a certain Antipas, had already laid down his life in martyrdom. But after taking the life of one of the saints, Satan's kingdom cannot stop darkness from coming upon the whole earth. The great irony is that the throne of Satan—symbolic of the kingdom of darkness—will now itself be shrouded in darkness. And yet, despite the agony which comes upon the inhabitants of the earth, those who worship the beast and his image are so devoted to their master they continue to curse God and refuse to repent.

With the coming of the sixth bowl judgment, the scene in verse 12 now shifts from various judgments upon the earth and its inhabitants, to the final eschatological battle in which God will crush all of his enemies. This the great battle of Armageddon.

The vision of the sixth bowl takes place against the backdrop of the sixth trumpet judgment and the symbolic barrier—the Euphrates River—which prevented the army of 200 million soldiers described in Revelation 9:13-15, from killing one third of humanity until released. The sixth bowl judgment depicts a massive escalation of this conflict. Says John, "*the sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East.*" Recall that Israel's oppressors, Assyria and Babylon had lived beyond the Euphrates, the symbolic border of that place where Israel had been held in captivity. Those living in the time of John, regarded the Euphrates as the eastern border of the Roman empire, and therefore, the edge of civilization itself.

⁵ Johnson, [The Triumph of the Lamb](#), 227-228.

But the image of the barrier imposed by the Euphrates being removed as a form of judgment is found throughout the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. When the Euphrates is dried up, it exposes Israel's captors to judgment themselves. In Isaiah 41-46, we read of an invading army led by Cyrus, king of Persia, who defeats the Babylonians so that Israel is freed to return to her home in Palestine. According to Isaiah 44:26-28, the prophet foretells of a time in which "*Jerusalem, 'shall be inhabited,' of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be built,' and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,' who says to the watery deep, 'Be dry, and I will dry up your streams.'* who says of Cyrus, '*He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid."*" Note that Cyrus liberates Israel from her Babylonian captivity after God dries up the streams of Babylon—i.e., the Euphrates, so that the Persians can invade Babylon and defeat her. Similarly, Jeremiah announces that God's judgment will come upon Babylon when God brings a drought which dries up her waters.⁶ Therefore, the removal of the barrier allows the agents of judgment to enter.

But there are other accounts of the drying up of bodies of water very prominently featured throughout redemptive-history. God created dry ground in the midst of the sea so that Israel could pass safely though. God dried up the Jordan River, so that Israel could enter the promised land. Now God symbolically dries up the water of the Euphrates to provide final deliverance for his people through the defeat of God's enemies. With the symbolic barrier of the Euphrates removed, the enemies of God now rush to assault the church, only to find themselves totally defeated by the direct intervention of God.

The kings of the east—later identified in verse 14 as kings of the whole world—advance upon God's people because they have been deceived by the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. Says John in verse 13, "*Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.*" The imagery of the frogs, recalls to mind the second plague upon Egypt, but here are symbolic of the demonic power which deceives the kings of the earth, gathering them for battle.

Notice that the great battle occurs on the great day of God Almighty, the same day as the event depicted in verse 15. "*Behold,*" Jesus says, "*I come like a thief.*" Even as Satan deceives the kings of the earth, gathering them for what they think will be a victory over the kingdom of God, to their great chagrin, this day becomes the day of defeat, themes which John will address in some detail in Revelation 19 and 20. The point is that once the barrier is removed, symbolized by the great river Euphrates, those who do the bidding of Satan gather for what they expect will be the final battle. But this is the day when Jesus comes suddenly, like a thief. And just as Jesus had warned his disciples when he was with them on the Mount of Olives, "watch, for you do not know when I will return," so now Jesus pronounces his blessing upon those who do as he instructed. "*Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.*" Given what follows in Revelation 17-18, where the seductive ways of the harlot brings God's judgment, getting caught naked seems to imply that Christians must not be caught in bed with the harlot when Christ returns to bring about her end.⁷

What follows in verse 16, is the subject of much debate, and is one of those verses which gives Revelation its reputation for being so mysterious. Says John, "*then they [the demonic spirits] gathered*

⁶ See Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 231-232.

⁷ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 234.

the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.” Most commentators believe that Armageddon is a reference to the plains of Meggido, northeast of Jerusalem, and the site of several important battles in Israel’s history (cf. Judges 5:19; 2 Kings 23:29). The most common interpretation of this verse is that at the end of the age, the armies of the world assemble on the plains of Meggido to finish off the nation of Israel, or to fight against the armies of heaven, when Jesus Christ destroys them.

But a growing number of commentators convincingly argue (and I think rightly so) that the reference to Armageddon, has nothing whatsoever to do with the plain of Meggido or to the war supposedly waged against the nation Israel at the end of the seven-year tribulation. Rather, it is argued that Armageddon should be understood as *Har-Magedon*, or “the Mount of Gathering” or Assembly.⁸

Recall that in Zechariah 14, the prophet speaks of the final battle occurring at Jerusalem, not Meggido. According to Zechariah 14:2-4, the Lord says, “*I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women raped. Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city. Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south.*” The similar language is used in Zechariah 12:3 where the prophet also speaks of Jerusalem, not Megiddo, as the scene of the final conflict.

Har-Magedon, The Mount of Gathering, (Mount of Assembly) is therefore, much more likely a reference to Mount Zion, the earthly counterpart of the heavenly assembly.⁹ In Revelation 14, we read that Jesus Christ stands triumphantly on Mount Zion among his people. If true, this means that the reference to Armageddon is not a description of a literal military battle in which men in tanks and airplanes fight against God. Instead, we have an apocalyptic image of the kings of the earth being gathered together by the dragon to wage war against Mount Zion, which is symbolic of the church of Jesus Christ.

This is the same event depicted from yet another “camera angle” in Revelation 19:19-21 when John sees the beast and the false prophet being thrown into the lake of fire. It is also described in Revelation 20:9-10, where those deceived by Satan after he is released from the Abyss, “*marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.*”

Therefore, it is certainly correct to think of Armageddon as the final and ultimate battle between Christ and his enemies. But this battle has nothing to do with the plains of Meggido, the nation of Israel, or the armies of the world fighting against Christ. John is giving us an apocalyptic vision of Satan’s final assault upon the church (Mount Zion, *Har Magedon*, the Mount of Assembly), an assault which is crushed by Jesus Christ at his return to earth in judgment. On that day, says John, Satan and all his henchmen (the beast and the false prophet), along with the kings and nations who serve them, are thrown

⁸ See Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 235; and M. G. Kine, “Har Magedon: The End of the Millennium,” *JETS* 39 (1996), 207-22.

⁹ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 235.

into the lake of fire. This is judgment day, when God's wrath is completed.

When the final battle gets underway, we read in verse 17, *"The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'It is done!' Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake,"* already mentioned in Revelation 6:12-14. This earthquake was also mentioned in Zechariah 14:3-5. But this is no ordinary earthquake. *"No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. The great city split into three parts (Babylon), and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible.* The seventh bowl describes the destruction of Babylon the Great, and is treated by John in some detail in the next two chapters of Revelation and to which we will turn in the coming weeks.

Therefore, the battle of Armageddon has nothing to do with Israel or the armed forces of the nations fighting against armies of Christ. The battle of Armageddon has to do with the fact that the on-going war between the dragon and his allies (including the beast, the false prophet, Babylon the Great, the harlot, the kings and nations who serve him) and Christ and his church (represented by Mount Zion, and the Mount of Assembly) is coming to an end. The final outcome is never in doubt. For just when it appears as though Satan will overcome the church, Jesus Christ will return and destroy the dragon and his henchmen, casting them all in the lake of fire where they will be tormented forever and ever.

Therefore, as God's people, who even now dwell in the spiritual Zion with Christ in our midst, we must remain ever vigilant. We must not sleep. We must stay awake, watching for the Lord's return. We must avoid the seductive ways of the harlot, lest we be caught naked and be shamefully exposed on the day of Christ Jesus. For Jesus Christ will return like a thief and crush all his enemies and deliver his people from the whiles of Satan. And with the saints in heaven, we cry out, "Yes, Lord God Almighty, just and true are your judgments." For a day is coming in which God's wrath will be poured out upon the whole world and all the enemies of Jesus Christ will receive their just desserts at the place called Armageddon.