

“A Robe Dipped in Blood”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 27

Texts: Revelation 19:11-21; Ezekiel 39:17-24

In Deuteronomy 32:35, God warns covenant breakers, “*It is mine to avenge; I will repay.*” In verse 41 of that same chapter, God declares, “*when I sharpen my flashing sword and my hand grasps it in judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries and repay those who hate me.*” In the closing chapters of the Book of Revelation, John is given a glimpse of that terrible day when God’s judgment comes upon the whole earth. God’s long-suffering mercies toward his rebellious creatures have come to an end. The end of the age has finally come. Judgment day is at hand.

As we continue to survey the final chapters of the Book of Revelation, John takes us from the issues facing his original audience—the persecution of the saints by the beast (the Roman empire)—to those things directly connected to the end of the age. Therefore, once John has been given a vision of the three cycles of judgment (the seven seals, the seven trumpets and seven bowls) each of which intensifies as the end draws near, John now fast-forwards his first-century reader to those events associated with the second advent of Jesus Christ at the end of the age. These events include the glorious redemption of all the saints and the final destruction of all of God’s enemies, including the harlot, the beast, the false prophet, as well as the destruction of the dragon (Satan) whom they worship and serve.

In the previous section of Revelation, which runs from Revelation 16:17 to Revelation 19:10, John describes God’s judgment upon the harlot, and contrasts the bride of the dragon (Babylon the Great) with the bride of Jesus Christ (which is the church). While the great harlot commits adultery with the kings of the earth, continually increasing her guilt, Christ’s bride, meanwhile, is preparing herself for her marriage to the Lamb. By holding fast to the testimony of Jesus in the face of persecution, by remaining faithful to her spouse, and resisting all of the seductive efforts of the harlot, while walking in the good works that Jesus Christ has prepared her to do, the bride readies herself to receive the gift of spotless wedding garments of fine white linen from her husband. Because of the mercies of her bridegroom, she is now holy and blameless, purified from every hint and trace of sin.

Indeed, heaven rejoices at the news that the time has come for God to destroy his enemies and all those who have persecuted the church. First on the list is the great harlot who is destroyed when God causes those who have committed spiritual adultery with her to turn upon her and bring her to ruin. The great city is consumed by flames, having become a desolate wasteland, the fitting punishment for her crimes. But while heaven rejoices, the kings and merchants of the earth mourn at the sight of Babylon going up in smoke. Not only do their own fortunes go up in the flames along with the city, the heart-broken onlookers know that the fate of the city will soon become theirs. For God will not only judge the harlot, he will judge all those who have participated in her idolatrous ways. God has warned them to flee from her before it is too late, but they will not. They would rather perish than repent.

But heaven not only rejoices because the destruction of Babylon vindicates God’s just ways in dealing with his creatures, Babylon’s destruction also means that the time has now come for the Lamb to take his bride. Christ’s bride has remained faithful and all rivals for her affections have been removed from the scene. Those very same saints who have been crying out “*How long, O Lord, before you avenge the wrong done to us by the beast?*” now celebrate because the moment for which they have been waiting has finally come. The Lord God Almighty has begun to reign! The great day of their redemption has come.

Death and sadness will be no more. This becomes the occasion for a great feast which celebrates the end of the age. God will provide the best meats, the finest of wine, along with the glorious wedding garments which are righteous deeds of the saints which flow from the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. This is not only the great messianic feast foretold by Israel's prophets, this is the great feast mentioned by Jesus in several of his parables.

This, beloved, will be a feast beyond all human comprehension. For it celebrates the final consummation, the marriage of the Lamb, and is that to which we are pointed every Lord's Day when we celebrate the Lord's Supper in anticipation of this great feast.

Once the great benediction has been declared to all of God's people, "Blessed are all those who are invited to the marriage supper of Christ the Lamb," the time has now come to discuss the fate of all of those who are not Christ's when the terrible day of judgment comes upon the whole world.

Before we begin, we need to be candid about the fact that there are several difficult doctrines associated with Christianity, and we cannot escape from them even if they make us uncomfortable. This should not come as a surprise since Christianity is based upon the entrance of the Holy God into human history. Throughout redemptive history, God repeatedly reveals his will, but supremely so in the Ten Commandments. Because Adam sinned as our representative before God and because each one of us has broken these commandment countless times, we are reckoned as sinners, without excuse, without any means of making things right. Since God is Holy he must punish every infraction of his law. If any are to be saved from God's just punishment, God himself must provide a means of salvation. Therefore, Christianity is a religion necessarily grounded upon the shedding of blood as a sacrifice for our sins. Either Christ is punished for us and in our place, or else God himself must punish us in the final judgment.

Not only does the very thought of this make us nervous, but many of us have unsaved loved ones and we not only fear for them, we grieve for them. Texts like this force us to face what lies ahead for those who are not Christ's. But this should not leave us without hope or confidence in God's mercy.

There are several things we need to keep in mind when we consider the final judgment. For one thing, the end of the age has not yet come. There is still time for our loved ones to come to faith in Christ. And let us not loose heart. John has also told us through the Book of Revelation that Christ's bride continues to bear witness of the gospel to unbelievers right up until the end. It is the preaching of the gospel through which God calls his elect to faith and there are very likely many more who will yet respond.

Furthermore, as we learned back in Revelation chapter 8, the prayers of the saints ascend into heaven, where God hears them, and then answers them, acting upon behalf of his people according to his will. Therefore, as we proceed to wrestle with this most difficult of subjects, let us keep in mind that God is still in the business of answering our prayers and saving sinners, even those sinners for whom we pray.

Let us also not forget the pastoral context in which John is writing. Even as John pens this letter, Christ's people are being persecuted and put to death by a Satanically-controlled government which used its full economic and military power to enforce it godless ways upon people who humbly follow Christ. Therefore, when John describes the day of judgment, it should be clear to God's people that despite the apparent power of the beast whenever he rears his ugly head, they should not fear, nor despair. The beast will get his in the end! Christians who are facing the beast and the harlot ought to do so with great confidence and not in fear, because they already know the fate all of those who persecute the church.

Beginning in verse 11 of Revelation 19, John sees yet another vision, this time when Christ now appears as the divine warrior *par excellence* ready to wage war upon all the enemies of God who have been deceived by the beast and the false prophet.

This particular vision is intended to give us an unmistakable contrast between the beast of Revelation 13, who being energized by the dragon arises from the sea, and the Lamb. Notice, that the beast is depicted as the image of Satan, while Christ is the *ikon* (image) of God (cf. Colossians 1:15). The beast has ten crowns, indicating that his kingdom is limited, while Christ wears many crowns (Revelation 19:12). The beast has blasphemous names written upon him while Christ has worthy names written upon him. The dragon gives the beast his power, while Christ's power and authority is that of his father. The beast seeks to imitate Christ through a fatal wound that is apparently healed. The beast seeks the worship of the inhabitants of the world. But Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and one day the whole world will confess him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And then there is the contrast which is most apparent in our text. The beast has been waging war on the saints. Christ now makes war on the beast.¹

The final battle brings to its climax the great victory that Jesus Christ has already won over Satan through his death and resurrection. All of the great battles between Christ and the Antichrist throughout redemptive history—from God's defeat of Pharaoh and his armies in the sea, to God's crushing of the city of Jericho which blocked the entrance into the promised land, to the divinely-ordained slaughter of the Canaanites, including men, women and children, who occupied the land God promised to Abraham—all of these things point us ahead to this final battle when Jesus Christ puts all of God's enemies to death with his flashing sword as he warned us he would do all the way back in the Book of Deuteronomy. What is depicted here is nothing less than the day of God's vengeance, foretold by all the prophets and apostles.

Postmillennarians understand John's vision in Revelation 19:11-21 to be an apocalyptic symbol of the word of God spreading throughout the world and subduing God's enemies by converting them to Christianity. While this is an attractive proposal and there is an important element of truth to it, the parallels between this passage and the sixth seal judgment, the seventh trumpet judgment, and the sixth and seventh bowl judgments, as well as the scene of judgment in Revelation 20:7-10, indicate that John is not depicting something which goes on throughout the course of present age, but is instead describing an event which brings the present age to its end. Therefore, this is not a reference to the word spreading throughout the present age, but is a reference to the final battle associated with the day of judgment.²

We need to keep in mind the fact that Revelation is not to be read like we would historical narrative—we start at the beginning and follow events through to the end in chronological fashion. The Book Revelation, on the other hand, contains a series of visions (each one being like a different camera angle looking at the same event). This means that Revelation 19:11-21, like the sixth seal, the seven trumpet, the sixth and seventh bowl judgments, is a yet another symbolic picture of what happens at the end of the age, when Jesus Christ returns to judge the world, seen from yet another new perspective.

Beginning in verse 11, John reports what he sees in this vision. *"I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war."* It is striking that John sees heaven open. In Revelation 4:1, we were informed that God had

¹ Poythress, *The Returning King*, 173.

² Poythress, *The Returning King*, 173.

previously revealed this open door only to John. Now with heaven open wide, the time has come for God to reveal himself to all humanity.³ That which was previously hidden and which could be glimpsed only by the saints, will now be witnessed by the whole world. The divine warrior rides who the white horse—white suggesting that the rider of the horse is victorious, like those clothed in the white robes—has been vindicated through his just judgments. He is faithful and true, covenantal language reinforcing the worthiness of the rider to bring judgment upon the earth. Hence this rider alone can both judge and make war with a justice not influenced by sinful human emotions or passions. His judgments are just and altogether righteous.⁴ His judgments are those of God himself. And his judgments are final.

Recalling the scene from the opening two chapters of this book when the risen Christ walked among the golden lampstands, which were symbolic of Christ's presence with the churches, John once again describes Jesus as having "*eyes are like blazing fire.*" This reminds John's readers that Jesus Christ sees all things, judging the inmost thoughts of the human heart. Jesus does not judge based upon outward appearances as men and women do. Furthermore, John says "*on his head are many crowns.*" Not only does this remind us that Jesus possesses and infinite authority and dominion, this also exposes the deception of Satan. The dragon had seven diadems, merely pretending to rule the world, while the beast's authority was limited to ten nations.⁵ Now we see these pretenders for what they are, for Jesus' authority to rule is without any limit or pretension whatsoever.

There is a strong connection in the prophets between the risen Christ wearing many crowns, and the fact that "*He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.*" According to Isaiah 62:2-3, a time is coming when "*The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow. You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God.*" In the original context, the prophet Isaiah is speaking of Jerusalem. God fulfills his covenant promises in Jesus Christ, who possesses the name no one else knows. He now bestows that name upon his bride, further identifying her with her husband.

Recall that back in Revelation 3:12, John spoke of the New Jerusalem and its identification with the "new name" given to believers mentioned in Revelation 2:17. The point is this. Not only have we been invited to the bridal feast, we have been given the groom's secret name known only to him.⁶ This is further explained in verse 16, where we learn more about the mysterious name. "*On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.*" This is a fitting name for the one who brings judgement upon the earth as depicted in what follows. It is also a great blessing for the bride to be united to a husband who possesses such a regal and glorious title.

In verse 13 we read that the great warrior is "*dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.*" This may indeed be a reference to Christ's own blood, shed for sinners. John has already told us that the Lamb is "*worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because [he was] slain, and with [his] blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.*" It is certainly

³ Poythress, The Returning King, 174.

⁴ Beale, Revelation, 950.

⁵ Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 270.

⁶ Beale, Revelation, 953.

possible that John is referring to Christ's death for our sins in using such language.

But given fact that the previous verse alludes to Isaiah 62, more than likely John has in mind the next chapter of Isaiah, where we read these amazing words in Isaiah 63:1-3: "*Who is this coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? "It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save." Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress? "I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing."*

Therefore, John is describing the coming judgment, not our redemption. Isaiah was speaking of God's judgment upon the Gentile nations. Israel's redeemer is also a warrior is covered with blood, just as though he had been in a winepress. Given the fact that the context here is one of judgment, the point is that Israel's God—now revealed in Jesus Christ—is stained with the blood of the nations he has now slain. The imagery of judgment—not redemption—is certainly reinforced by the balance of the chapter.

In verse 14, John witnesses a mighty host. "*The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean.*" When Jesus Christ returns in judgment he does not come alone. The hosts of heaven follow after him, wearing the garments given them by their leader. As to the identities of those who accompany Christ, there are a number of texts which speak of an angelic army executing Christ's final judgment.

In Matthew 13:40-42 we read, "*As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" But given the fact that these people are clothed in white garments, and given the statement in Revelation 17:14 that the Lamb "*will overcome [his enemies] because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers*" it is likely that these are the saints who accompany Christ and his angelic armies on the day of judgment. Notice too, these soldiers do not fight in the great battle. But they do accompany the one who slays the wicked, who will strike the nations with his rod of judgment.⁷

What follows in verse 15 is filled with a number of loud echoes from the Old Testament. "*Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter.' He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.*" In Isaiah 49:2 we read of the word of God, placed in the prophet's mouth, and cutting like a sword. In Isaiah 11:4 we read of the word of God's mouth, striking the nations. Now these two verses are brought together to speak of divine vengeance. In Psalm 2:9, the Psalmist speaks of Israel's Davidic Messiah, who will break all of his enemies with a rod of iron. And then, as we have seen, in Isaiah 63, we read of YHWH judging the nations as though he were stomping wine in a press, venting his fury. All of these are now brought together to demonstrate the severity of the divine judgment which is coming upon the whole world, as well as to remind us of the authority of the judge.

The time has come for another angel to reveal some of the gruesome details associated with God's righteous judgment. Before we turn to Revelation 19:17 and following, recall that in the 39th chapter of

⁷ See Beale, Revelation, 906 ff.

Ezekiel, our Old Testament lesson, the prophet foretells of a coming judgment, in which birds of prey will feed upon the flesh of those defeated by Israel's God. Beginning in verse 17, Ezekiel writes, "*Son of man, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Call out to every kind of bird and all the wild animals: 'Assemble and come together from all around to the sacrifice I am preparing for you, the great sacrifice on the mountains of Israel. There you will eat flesh and drink blood. You will eat the flesh of mighty men and drink the blood of the princes of the earth as if they were rams and lambs, goats and bulls—all of them fattened animals from Bashan. At the sacrifice I am preparing for you, you will eat fat till you are glutted and drink blood till you are drunk. At my table you will eat your fill of horses and riders, mighty men and soldiers of every kind,' declares the Sovereign LORD. "I will display my glory among the nations, and all the nations will see the punishment I inflict and the hand I lay upon them. From that day forward the house of Israel will know that I am the LORD their God."*

John sees the same gruesome scene, this time directly connected to the day of judgment and Christ's second advent. "*And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, 'Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.'*" There is great irony contained within these verses. In the first 10 verses of Revelation 19, John has told us of the great blessing of being invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb—that great feast which the prophets described as including the best of meat and the finest of wine. Recall that we are not invited to this wedding as mere guests. Rather, we are invited to be Christ's own bride.

But there is another feast yet to come. A feast of judgment. For this feast, YHWH also issues an invitation, this time to all the birds of prey. All those who reject the mercies of Jesus Christ will be invited to this feast along with the birds. They won't be mere guests either. They will be the main course! The great and the mighty in the eyes of the world, will fall under the judgment of God. Their power, prestige and wealth will not afford them the dignity of a decent burial. They will be nothing more than food for vultures.

John now sees one more graphic image—the next scene in the final judgment, which is the last battle. Thus we read in verses 19-21, "*then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh."*

The great struggle of redemptive history now reaches its grand climax. All those who have worshiped the dragon will now suffer the full consequences of their actions. In the midst of the final and furious war the beast is waging upon the church at the end of the age, suddenly Christ will appear and the beast will be caught alive and thrown into the lake of fire, to be tormented forever and ever. The false prophet, who enticed and deceived the peoples of the earth into worshiping the beast and his image will suffer the same fate. All those who serve the beast will be consumed by the wrath of God, their remains will be eaten by birds. The harlot has now been judged. The beast will now be judged. The false prophet will likewise be judged. And all those who serve them will be judged. And in the next chapter, we will watch as the dragon suffers the same fate as do all his henchmen. Jesus Christ will triumph over all of enemies and he will vindicate his bride, those he has marked with his secret name. But all of those who wear the mark of the beast will suffer the full fury of God's eternal wrath!

While the second coming of Jesus Christ is pure gospel for all those invited to the marriage supper of Christ the Lamb—it is good news for all of those who trust in Jesus Christ through faith alone need never fear the judgment of God, it has been taken away by the cross of Jesus Christ—for those who know not Christ, his second coming is pure law. It is that day every non-Christians should dread. On that day, our great God will appear in his wrath, his robe dipped in blood and he will crush the nations of the earth like grapes in a winepress.

Be warned. If you are not trusting in Christ for your salvation, you cannot stand. You will be consumed. You now know what awaits you.

But it is not too late to receive an invitation to the supper of the Lamb. Flee to Jesus Christ this very moment, before that day comes when he shall be your judge, not your savior. Amen!