

LESSON 8A

THE TIME OF HARVEST

BY RAY C. STEDMAN

John Wesley once said, "Give me a hundred men who love nothing but God and hate nothing but sin, and I will shake the whole world for Christ." I think Wesley probably underestimated, because in the 14th chapter of the book of Revelation, to which we come this morning, we read that Jesus chose not just 12, not even 100, but 144,000 men, and with that number he would to shake the world in the closing days of this age.

In Chapter 7 we saw these 144,000 were chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, 12,000 from each tribe. In Chapter 14 they reappear, and we will see their ministry described:

Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless. {Rev 14:1-5 NIV}

It is important to see exactly the location where these 144,000 and the Lamb are seen. The opening sentence tells us they were "standing on Mount Zion" -- the temple mount in Jerusalem. This means that they were on earth, in Jerusalem, not in heaven. And they are seen together, the Lamb (*Jesus*). They are 144,000 male Jews chosen out of

Israel -- "Christ's Commandos," as we called them earlier.

I want to try and put some loose ends together here. According to the promise of Jesus given to the seven churches in the opening chapters of this book, he told them in several places that he would take the church (i.e., the true believers of this present age), to be with him before this last seven-year period would begin upon the earth. This was accomplished, as Paul describes it in First Thessalonians 4, in what is called the "rapture" (*or departure*) of the church to be with Christ. The last word of that Thessalonian passage is, "so shall we ever be with the Lord," {1 Th 4:17b KJV}.

The problem that people get into at that point is they think that being "with the Lord" in heaven means to be taken far off into space somewhere. We all have difficulty thinking of heaven as being right here on earth as well as off in space. In other words, heaven is another dimension of existence just beyond our present senses. You can be in heaven and still be on earth at the same time. As I read these prophetic passages I am more and more convinced that this will be the case -- the church is with the Lord, but the Lord is on earth during the whole last seven years. The church is with him, but invisible to the rest of the world, and ministering to this select group of 144,000 Jews as Jesus appears to them from time to time.

If this is true, Jesus will be in exactly the same condition with them as he was with the eleven disciples after his resurrection, when for a period of 40 days he appeared from time to time to them. At different times and in different places he was with them, and yet he would not be with them; he would

step back into the realm of invisibility after appearing in their midst. This seems to be the situation here. These are not only 12 disciples - they are 12 times 12 times 1,000 -- all men of Israel chosen for a special work on earth during these last days. If you can put that scene into your imagination you will get a much clearer picture of what is going on in these scenes.

Now let us look at the characteristics of these 144,000. We are told five things about them:

First, they learn a new song which they hear from heaven. Remember, heaven is not way off somewhere, it is just beyond the realm of visibility. They hear a great group singing the song of the redeemed. We are not told precisely who it is that sings, but you will notice they are identified with a pronoun. Verse 3 says, "And *they* sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders." Who are "they"? It is apparently a huge group. They make a sound like the "roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder." But it was a sweet sound -- "like that of harpists playing their harps." Surely, what the 144,000 hear is the church as it is "with the Lord," singing his praises and singing the song of the redeemed!

These 144,000 are living men, still on earth, not yet glorified or transfigured, but following the Lord as he appears to them from time to time as we see him here now on Mount Zion. In other words, they are men who march to a different drum beat. It was Henry David Thoreau who said, "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer." Here is a group of committed men who listen to different drum beat; they follow the music of heaven! They can learn the song of the redeemed because they know themselves what redemption means. They, too, have been redeemed.

Second, we are told they kept themselves for the Lord only. They were separated unto him. The phrase is, "they did not defile themselves with women." Now don't get upset, ladies. These are not chauvinists; they are celibates. This is not a put-down of marriage, or of sex. It is a reference to what these 144,000 would do. For them to be married would be defiling because it is outside the will of God for them. That is all this means. They are separated

unto the Lord to be his, just as the Apostle Paul was. Paul tells us in several places that he was committed to celibacy. He was single, and he devoted his life to the Lord as an unmarried man. He knew it was not the will of God for him to be married. So these men follow Christ completely. They are free to do so without any ties with anyone else because they were called to a dangerous and demanding work and needed to be unencumbered in following the Lamb wherever he went.

That is the third thing said of them. They followed the Lamb throughout the earth. I believe that these 144,000 are the brethren whom our Lord refers to in Matthew 25, when he tells us that where he tells us that when he comes again as the Son of Man he will sit on his throne and will judge the nations on the basis of how they treated the "least of these my brethren" -- "Inasmuch as you have done it [*or did not do it*] unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it [*or not done it*] unto me," {Matt 25:40 KJV}. The world's treatment of these Jewish Christians will reveal where each individual's heart loyalty is truly found, during these terrible days of worldwide judgment.

The fourth thing said is they are the "firstfruits" of the harvest during the tribulation period. We already have seen part of this in Chapter 7 -- the great multitude which no man can number that come from every "tribe and nation and people and language" {cf, Rev 7:9 NIV} in response to the preaching of these 144,000. We will see another aspect of that when we come to Verses 14-16 of this chapter.

The fifth thing that is said about these is they are transformed men. They are clearly born again. "No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless," i.e., without blemish. They have been cleansed and changed by grace -- just as we also have been, if we know the Lord. Jude tells us that true believers now will be presented before God's presence "without fault and with great joy," {Jude 1:24}. So it is also with these redeemed Jews who recognize their once-crucified Messiah and follow him faithfully wherever he goes.

At this point the scene suddenly changes, and John sees three angels flying through the heavens making three important announcements. This first

one is given in Verses 6 and 7:

Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth -- to every nation, tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water." {Rev 14:6-7 NIV}

This is called here the "eternal gospel," i.e., the everlasting gospel. We learn from the angel's words that it is the gospel of creation; it is the witness to God that nature unceasingly gives. People are told to worship him who "made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water." That is the fundamental witness of God to found everywhere in the world. It is the witness that no one can miss because it is manifest all around us.

As the words of Psalm 19 proclaim, "The heavens declare the glory of God. The firmament shows his handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night shows knowledge," {cf, Psa 19:1-2 KJV}. We are part of nature.

Our own nature witnesses that there is a God. It takes four years of college and two years of postgraduate work to deny that! Nature is everywhere testifying to the existence and the glory of God. What it says is, "There is a God and you cannot live without him. You breathe by him. You think by him." As Paul said to the Athenians, "In him we live and move and have our being" {Acts 17:28} -- everybody, without exception does. So this gospel declares, "Since there is a God, and you cannot exist without him, therefore, worship him!" It is the fundamental cry of nature.

In the great faith chapter in Hebrews 11, the writer says in Verse 6, "He who comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him," {cf, Heb 11:6 KJV}. Paul rings the changes on this in Romans 1, in the words, "What may be known about God is plain to them," {Rom 1:19 NIV}. God has made it plain through the things that he has created. This becomes the basis for the ultimate judgment of mankind. God will say, in effect, to people in that day, "If you knew that I was essential to you, did you worship me?" That is the gospel by which men will be judged when, as it says, "the hour of his judgment has come."

A second angel now cries out in Verse 8:

A second angel followed and said, "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries." {Rev 14:8 NIV}

This is the first mention in Revelation of "Babylon the Great." It will move onto center stage in Chapters 17 and 18. It is the woman who rides the beast that we referred to briefly last week. It is, as we shall see when we come to those chapters, the false church, that which professes to be Christian but really is not, the church that does go through the great tribulation! Before it appears, God wants us to know that it is treacherous and adulterous, and it will fall in due course.

Then a third angel speaks:

A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur [or brimstone] in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name." {Rev 14:9-11 NIV}

We saw in Chapter 13 how the Antichrist exerts economic control of the whole world. No one can buy or sell without the mark of the beast imprinted into the back of the hand or on the forehead. According to this passage, the angel announces this is a fatal choice. Anyone who receives this mark shall experience the fury of God's wrath to the last dregs.

This is what is often called "hellfire and brimstone" preaching. It is regarded as contrary to the gospel of love. But all through the Bible you see that God's love is manifest to men everywhere in urging them to escape this judgment. God in love pleads with people, "Do not go on to this end!" But ultimately he must judge those who refuse his offer of grace. He says, in effect, "I love you and I can provide all you need. Therefore, love me, and you will find the fulfillment your heart is looking for." But many men and women say, "No, I do not want that. I will take your gifts, I will take all the good

things you provide, but I do not want you! Let me run my own life. Let me serve my own ends. Let me have my own kingdom." To such, God ultimately says, "All right, have it your way!"

God has three choices:

First, he can let rebellion go on forever and never judge it. In this case the terrible things that are happening on earth, all these distressing injustices, the cruelty, the anger, the hate, the malice, the sorrow, the hurt, the pain, the death that now prevails will go on forever. God does not want that, and neither does man.

Second, God can force men to obey him and control them as robots. But he will never do that because that means they cannot love him. Love cannot be forced.

Therefore, third, the only choice God really has is that he must withdraw ultimately from those who refuse his love. He must let them have their own way forever. That results in terrible torment of godlessness. If God is necessary to us, then to take him out of our lives is to plunge us into the most terrible sense of loneliness and abandonment that mankind can know. We have all experienced it to some degree when we get what we want and then discover we do not want what we have got! For that sense of bored emptiness to go on forever is unspeakable torment.

Now, once again in the midst of this bleak scene, the saints of that day are encouraged:

This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.

Then I heard a voice from heaven says, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on."

"Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them." {Rev 14:12-13 NIV}

When the earth is filled with violence and widespread hate, the work of the saints of that day is to wait. "This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints," a determination not to yield at any point or to give way to the glorification of man in that day.

Then the promise comes from the voice of the Spirit himself. John is told to write this down as a

special guarantee: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord *from now on*." Why does he add "from now on?" It has always been true, has it not, that the dead who die in the Lord are blessed? I have stood at many gravesides and repeated these words, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. They shall rest from their labor and their deeds will follow them." That has always been true, but there is a special reason why John is told to add the words, "from now on." It is because the saints of that day it will feel as if they have missed the resurrection! The church has already been taken out of the world, some by resurrection and some by transformation, and these believers know this. Those that once were here are gone suddenly, transformed by the Lord himself. As Paul said, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we shall be changed," {1 Cor 15:52}. To those saints who are on earth after that, it will raise the troubling thought that when they die, they are not sure that they will be included in the resurrection, for it is already past.

It is exactly the same problem that the Thessalonian Christians faced when Paul wrote his first letter to them. They thought that when their loved ones died they would miss the rapture because they saw that event in terms of catching up or snatching away living saints. So they had written to Paul about it and he said to them, in effect, "Don't worry, your dead loved ones will make it. The Lord himself will come, 'and the dead in Christ shall rise first, then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord,'" {cf, 1 Th 4:13-17}. So these saints of the last days are given that special reassurance of the Spirit: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. They, too, shall rest from their labor, and their deeds will follow them."

Now once again the scene changes. We learned in the first section that the 144,000 from the tribes of Israel are the "firstfruits" of the harvest of the last days. If they are the firstfruits, now comes the rest of the harvest:

I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one "like a son of man" with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud

voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, "Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." So he that was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested. {Rev 14:14-16 NIV}

We must ask, who is this one seated on the cloud "like a son of man," wearing a victor's crown and holding a sickle in his hand? There can hardly be any doubt: it is the Lord Jesus. He himself had given {this to} his disciples in Matthew 13, in the parable of the wheat and the weeds {cf, Matt 13:24-30, 13:36-43}. In the parable, the servants had asked the Lord, "Shall we pull up these weeds?" But he said to them, "No, let both grow together until the harvest, and then I will tell the harvester, 'First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned, and then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'" Then Jesus interpreted that parable to the disciples, saying, "The harvest is the end of the age (*the 7-year period to which we have come in this book*), and the harvesters are the angels." This agrees exactly with what we have here. The angels announce that the time of harvest has come, and the words of Jesus in Matthew 13 will be literally fulfilled. Let me read them to you:

"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. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear." {Matt 13:41-43 NIV}

These are very clear words from the lips of Jesus himself.

But there is still another scene of harvest:

Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe." The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia [which is about 180 miles]. {Rev 14:17-20}

Is this the same story of harvest twice-told? No. You will notice the first harvest is a harvest of wheat. It is cut with a sickle, and it is a separation of the true wheat from the false-looking wheat (darnel is literally the word, "the tares of the field"). Darnel looks like wheat at first, but it is not. As we have seen, the angels will separate the two. But this is clearly a grape harvest, a vintage harvest. The vine in Scripture is frequently a symbol of Israel. The prophet Isaiah, in Chapter 5, uses this symbol, describing Israel as a vine brought out of Egypt and planted in a beautifully cared-for land by God himself. Psalm 80 refers to the same thing -- Israel is a vine brought out of Egypt. At the Last Supper, the Lord himself said, "I am the true vine and you are the branches" {John 15:5a NIV}, speaking of his Jewish disciples.

As a symbol of Israel, the wine-press describes the judgment of apostate Israel. Strangely, most of the present nation of Israel does not believe their own Scriptures. Many of them are atheists. Many of them deny the Word of God in the Old Testament, or that it applies to them as a special people at all. This is, therefore, the judgment of apostate Israel. It is called in Jeremiah 30, "the time of Jacob's trouble," {Jer 30:7b}. Many other Scriptures describe it. It will be a time of warfare once again against Israel, beginning with an invasion of the nation by great armies from the north. Palestine is overrun. It is at this time when the woman (true Israel) whom we saw in Chapter 12 flees to hide in the desert. But apostate Israel is destroyed, and Jerusalem is sacked and partially destroyed. You can read that in Zechariah 14.

The prophet Joel describes it in vivid language. Hear these words from his third chapter:

Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat [*which means "God judges"*], for there will I sit to judge all the nations on every side.

Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.

Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow -- so great is their wickedness." {Joel 3:12-13 NIV}

Obviously this is the same scene as we have here.

Notice, by the way, in Verse 20, the change from a symbol to the literal meaning. Grapes are thrown into the winepress (*that is a symbol*), but blood pours out -- that is the literal meaning of pressed grapes or wine. When we take the Lord's Supper, wine symbolizes the blood of Christ for us. Here, blood covers the land for 180 miles, the length of Israel. It is a terrible scene of judgment. We will come to it again in the next two chapters where we will look at it in more detail.

I must leave this now, for the moment, but I want to remind you that

- Beyond these scenes of judgment,
- Beyond these terrible descriptions of what is to come upon the earth,
- Beyond the blood,
- Beyond the slaughter,
- Beyond the darkness,
- Beyond the heartache and the sorrow and the misery, when the land is covered with blood from end to end,

there is coming a new day, a wonderful day, a time that the prophets have described. Beyond the time of Jacob's trouble is the time when Israel shall blossom like a rose, and like a vine spread its branches throughout the whole of the earth, and their Messiah will reign amidst his people over the whole world. It is the utopia that men have dreamed of for centuries. That is what God is working toward, and that is what will eventually come to pass.

I hope you are facing your own personal relationship to these things. God is always asking, "If you know that I am the One who is necessary to your very existence, do you worship me? Will you give yourself to me?" This is the choice we all must make.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you for your wonderful word of truth. How clear it is! How true it is! We pray that the Spirit of grace may impress upon our hearts the degree to which you have gone in order to redeem men from their wicked ways, from their evil hearts, from the evil that is present in everyone of us. We thank you that you have found a way to cleanse and wash and make us new and fresh again. Help us to lay hold of that while the time is ripe. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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LESSON 8B

EARTH'S LAST TRIAL

BY RAY C. STEDMAN

The book of Revelation surveys God's solution to the crisis of history; how he will bring about the long promised world of peace and blessing. After centuries of patient waiting and putting up with might-is-right arrogance, hate, greed and the bloodshed that has characterized our earth so long, God says there comes a time when he will call a halt to the whole rotten business! Eugene Peterson, with his gift of eloquence, has put it this way:

"Surely, after all these centuries it is time to ... call the perpetrators of these cruelties on the carpet and wipe the condescending smiles off their faces with a once-for-all judgment."

This is the time when the great cry of the oppressed of all ages is finally answered: "How long, O Lord, how long?"

We will find the final series of judgments from God in Chapters 15 and 16.

I don't know how you feel but I find it a real relief to come to something more significant than the great broccoli crisis that has occupied official Washington in recent days! Earlier we sang, "Rise up, O men of God, have done with lesser things." That seems most appropriate since a discussion of the merits of broccoli is hardly of worldwide significance today.

The pouring out of the seven bowls of the wrath of God is the third of a series of sevens that has formed the structure of this book. It is introduced to us here by a great sign which John sees in heaven:

I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues -- last, because with them God's wrath is completed. And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the

sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb:

**"Great and marvelous are your deeds,
Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways,
King of the ages.
Who will not fear you, O Lord,
and bring glory to your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship before you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed."
{Rev 15:1-4 NIV}**

The first thing to notice here is the promise from God that this is the last of the series of judgments. We have reached a turning point of history when we come to these seven bowls of God's wrath. God will then begin to set up his kingdom upon the earth.

In this scene John describes a great host of martyrs, men and women who have given up their lives under the Antichrist, the beast of Chapter 13, and they are now seen in heaven standing on the sea of glass or crystal (*not beside it, as the NIV says*). We first saw this sea of glass in Chapter 4, and there we understood it to be a symbol of the Spirit of holiness, especially of the righteous holiness which the Spirit imparts to those who come to Christ. That is the only basis for man to appear before the presence of God. We would not dare to stand in his holy presence if we did not stand on a holiness which is given to us. Here it is described as "mixed with fire," because it is a holiness manifested in the midst of persecution.

These martyrs are said to be “victorious over the beast.” I love that way of putting it. As you view this scene of martyrdom and judgment, it looks as though when these men and women leave the earth they are losers -- but when they arrive in heaven they are victors! It is a wonderful revelation of how God works far differently from man. Man is under the illusion that what he sees happening is actually according to the way he views it, but it really is not. The Antichrist thinks he is getting rid of his enemies down here, but what he is really doing is running a shuttle service to heaven! He is but an elevator boy in God’s service, taking loads of saints up to glory. He does not realize that God is using him for the very purposes that he has ordained.

This host of martyrs sings two songs, the Song of Moses (*recorded in Exodus 15 as the Israelites came out of Egypt and crossed the Red Sea*), and the song we have just read together, the Song of the Lamb here in Revelation 15. These songs are the first and last songs, so described, in Scripture, and both of them are a description of the deliverance of God’s people by divine power, based upon a blood redemption. When Moses and the Israelites sang the Song of Moses they were looking back to the blood of a lamb put over the lintels of the doorposts to keep them safe when the Angel of Death passed through the land of Egypt. Here the martyrs are praising God and honoring him for the divine power that has delivered them from the wrath of the Antichrist, based on the blood of redemption shed by the Lamb of God.

The striking thing about this Song of the Lamb is, there is not one single word about their own achievements! They do not ever say, “O Lord, how faithful we have been to you! How true we have been to your word! How steadfastly we have endured!” The only pronouns used in the song are “your” and “you” -- “Great and marvelous are *your* deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are *your* ways, King of the ages (*or King of the nations*). Who will not fear *you*, O Lord, and bring glory to *your* name? For *you* alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before *you*, for *your* righteous acts have been revealed.” When you stand in the presence of God you will not feel that you have done anything. You will simply be grateful -- grateful beyond words -- for what God has done for you.

From Verse 5 to the end of this brief chapter the seven angels proceed to the final judgment.

After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of Testimony, was opened. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed. {Rev 15:5-8 NIV}

This is an awesome scene, very much like the one that Isaiah describes in his 6th chapter, where he cries, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted and the train of his robe filled the temple,” {Isa 6:1 NIV}. He heard the seraphim call, and “at the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.” It was a most awesome sight. Here also, John sees the great temple in heaven open and the seven angels file out of the Holy of Holies, bearing the seven bowls of the wrath of God.

We are told that this smoke symbolizes the powerful glory of God -- it is “smoke from the glory of God and from his power.” I wondered as I read that if this is the origin of the expression, “Holy Smoke.” At any rate it fills the great temple so no one can enter until the work of the angels is completed. Again, that is symbolic. What does it mean? I am afraid what it means is that it is too late to pray! By faith and by prayer we can enter into the presence of God in his temple, but here it has become impossible. The time has come when men can no longer repent. It is too late to pray when this judgment scene begins.

In Chapter 16, the seven angels pour out their bowls in rapid succession. It is a terrible time of judgment, the most intensive period of tribulation the world has ever seen. It is what several of the Old Testament prophets call “The Great and Terrible day of the Lord.” It is what Jesus referred to in the Olivet Discourse, in Matthew 24, when he said, “If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive,” {Matt 24:22 NIV}. No one! All the population of

the world would have been destroyed. It is a brief, intense period which comes at the close of the last 3-1/2 years of the Great Tribulation. As we go through this passage you will notice that it covers the same areas of judgment as the trumpets do. In other words, it is an intensification of the judgment of the trumpets which we have already seen.

Let us look at these quickly now.

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 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. {Rev 16:1-2 NIV}

As under the trumpet judgments, these visitations are both literal and symbolic. They actually do occur as described, but they have a hidden meaning as well. They reveal something that otherwise would be unknown. The land that the first bowl is poured out on, as we have already seen, represents Israel. There will be a judgment within the land of Israel. It indicates that this falls upon apostate Jews who follow the beast, who are deceived by his lies and propaganda and who accept him as the Messiah. The judgment is in the form of sores -- painful and ugly boils that break out all over the body.

For a time, as a young man, I had a series of boils on my body, and I remember well how terribly painful and ugly they were.

These sores break out suddenly and without apparent cause. We are seeing foreshadows of such today, as for instance, the great plague of AIDS which has come suddenly upon our world. No one knew of it before; it suddenly appeared. These are forms of God's judgment, sent to teach us to look at ourselves and what is happening in society. They picture a terrible inward corruption, creating mental torment and ugly moods which result in the destruction of life. That is certainly the picture here.

Then the next plague is described:

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. {Rev 16:3 NIV}

The sea, we have seen before, represents Gentile nations, especially those around the Mediterranean Sea within the old Roman Empire. The sea literally becomes blood red. We have already seen foreshadows of this in the phenomenon scientists call the "red tide," which occasionally appears in the Caribbean and other seas protected by land masses. A microorganism increases suddenly and turns the waters blood red, and all life that is in the area dies. It is what is described here.

It may not occur in all the oceans of the earth. I think that would make life impossible on the globe. Probably this is referring to the Mediterranean Sea. But if an oil spill like that in Alaska creates such terrible havoc, what will it be like when the whole of the Mediterranean falls victim to this red tide?

Then the third angel acts:

The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood. 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."

And I heard the altar respond:

"Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments." {Rev 16:4-7 NIV}

This judgment falls on the rivers and the springs as we saw under the trumpets. Rivers are polluted by the same apparent phenomenon of the red tide which makes them impossible to drink from. This, too, is, literally, probably within the limits of the Roman world. Symbolically, it speaks of the pollution of the fountains of wisdom and refreshment in society, i.e., the leaders of thought, the politicians, the philosophers, the scientists, the mind -- benders of the age. They are the ones to whom people look for refreshment of ideas and leadership in philosophy. Their minds become possessed by wrong ideas and lying philosophies - specifically, the idea that man is his own God and is quite capable of handling everything in his life.

John hears an angel affirm that this judgment is right and just on God's part. It is based on a principle we often hear quoted today, "What goes

around, comes around!” What you dish out yourself will come back to you some day. These people had shed the blood of the prophets and of the saints of God, therefore God is justly giving them over to drink blood themselves. It pictures what we often see today. We must suffer from the very things that we run after and want so badly. Even the altar -- a symbol of the place of surrogate sacrifice, someone else dying in our place -- affirms that this is just. The altar symbolizes the theme of redemption. If that substitute sacrifice is rejected and the redemption that it accomplishes is not received, the altar says it is only just that one must suffer the consequences oneself.

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. {Rev 16:8-9 NIV}

For a brief time, the sun's heat is suddenly increased. Scientists are familiar with this phenomenon. Every now and then great flares of fire burst from the surface of the sun, causing havoc with the magnetism of the earth, affecting radio waves, etc. We have long known about this. Here apparently is an enormously increased flare from the sun which creates intense heat upon the earth. People are anguished and suffer as a result. And, as the account suggests, they see that it is coming from God. No man controls the sun. No scientist can get anywhere near it or do anything to it. The sun, that flaming star that lights our solar system and warms our bodies, is far too intense for man to tinker with. God does this, and men know it. Yet it leaves men unrepentant. The terrible folly of unbelief, of refusing God's grace, is that you gradually lose the capacity to repent. At last you reach a state of hardness of heart which no longer can respond or does respond to what God is doing. It is too late to pray!

Now the fifth angel is seen:

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. {Rev 16:10-11 NIV}

It is stated that this judgment is limited to the

“kingdom of the beast,” i.e., the revived Roman Empire, or Western Europe. It describes a great area of earth covered with a sudden and unexplainable darkness.

Again, it is not the first time a phenomenon like this has occurred. There have been several times when unexplained darkness has covered a portion of the earth. On May 19, 1780, all the New England states were covered with such a darkness. President Kennedy referred to it in one of his addresses. It is called “the Dark Day,” when all of New England was for several hours plunged into a deep darkness. No one has yet explained how it happened. It may be the same phenomenon that occurred at the crucifixion of Jesus when darkness covered the land for three hours. That was not an eclipse of the sun. If your version says so, then it is wrong.

It is an unexplained darkness, symbolizing the removal of moral light -- light from God. All sense of truth and righteousness, or even of God himself, is lost. It foreshadows that terrible “outer darkness” into which Jesus says those who are unrepentant at last will find their destiny.

The sixth angel follows quickly:

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. 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. {Rev 16:12-14 NIV}

Suddenly there is an interjection. A voice seems to come out of heaven itself. It is the voice of Jesus. He says:

“Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.” {Rev 16:15 NIV}

Then the account returns to the sixth bowl:

Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon. {Rev 16:16 NIV}

You have heard of Armageddon, have you not? This judgment falls on the Euphrates River, which was mentioned also under the trumpet judgment.

It dries up the river to prepare the way for the kings of the East, i.e., the armies of Eastern nations such as India, China, Japan, etc.

A phenomenon of our day is the rise to power in recent years of these nations to become great military and economic forces. The rise of Japan from shambles in only 40 some years is one of the most amazing recoveries that history records. Japan has become a world economic power, and China is not far behind.

All this is undoubtedly in preparation for the day of judgment which is to come at the close of this age.

Rudyard Kipling, the English poet, anticipates this in a quotation you have often heard. He is quoted as saying,

*East is East and West is West,
And never the twain shall meet.*

But that is not the whole quotation. We end it there as though these two will never get together, but the whole quotation reads,

*East is East and West is West,
And never the twain shall meet,
'Til earth and sky stand presently
At God's great judgment seat.*

So there is coming a time when East and West shall come together: It is at the battle of Armageddon!

We are here given insight into the way nations are manipulated by unseen forces. They are unconscious of the fact but they are being made to do certain things. Here appear three evil spirits, like frogs, which come out of the Satanic trinity -- the great red dragon, the scarlet beast, and the false prophet -- and, by miracles, they deceive the nations. They trick them into launching World War III. It is a terrible time when the nations of the world launch the nuclear rockets they have been holding in reserve until then. This is the time when, as we saw in Chapter 9, armies of 200,000,000 gather into Palestine, to make war, first with one another and then, in a last desperate combat, with the Lamb of God himself!

As we have seen before in these series, there is always a parenthesis between the sixth and seventh of each series. Here that parenthesis is only one verse

long, Verse 15. Here Jesus speaks, saying, "Behold, I come like a thief!" That reference to his coming as a thief reminds us of Paul's word to the Thessalonians in chapter 5 of his first letter:

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. {1 Th 5:1-3 NIV}

That seems to refer to the same scene that we have recorded here. The Lord Jesus came for his church at the beginning of this seven-year period, and he and the church remain on earth, invisible, behind the scenes, but suddenly Jesus will appear. The purpose of the Lord's coming, as announced here, is to strip off the garments of hypocrisy by which men have clothed themselves throughout this time.

We have all witnessed the hypocrisy of politicians and other leaders, even Christians, being stripped away. It is always God's work to take away facades, to let people see one as he really is.

So Jesus says, "Blessed is he who keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed." The only garments that can never be taken away are the garments of righteousness which Jesus himself gives. Those in that day who have those garments will be blessed indeed.

So we read in Verse 16, "They [*the three frog-like spirits*] gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon," that great plain of Esdraelon which stretches from the foot of the mountain of Megiddo in the northern part of Israel.

When Napoleon saw this plain, he said, "Here indeed all the armies of the earth may gather for battle."

Now the seventh angel acts:

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 [*We have seen this twice before: the sounds of Sinai that mark the end of God's judgments*]. No earthquake

like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake [*The Richter scale reading is not given here, but it must be somewhere around 11 or 12 or larger*]. The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed [*The "great city" is Jerusalem. It is identified for us in chapter 11 as such*]. 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. {Rev 16:17-21 NIV}

This terrible scene falls first, we are told, upon the atmosphere, upon the air.

You may recall that in Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul calls Satan "the ruler of the kingdom of the air," {Eph 2:2 NIV}.

This judgment probably describes nuclear warfare which releases enormous clouds of radiation upon the earth so that the air is literally poisoned. We saw something of this in the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in Russia which poisoned the atmosphere in wide areas of the country.

God answers this with the greatest earthquake the world has ever known. Jerusalem is split into three parts by this movement of the earth. You can read a description of it also in Zechariah 14, where the prophet tells us that the Mount of Olives will split in half and part of it move to the north and part to the south, and a great valley will be created in between. From other Scriptures we learn that the topography of the whole land of Israel will be altered. At this time, also, God judges Babylon the Great, the city that represents the false church. We will see that judgment in the next two chapters.

This earthquake is accompanied also by a terrible hail storm with hail stones weighing over one hundred pounds falling from the sky. For years I have been clipping out of the back pages of newspapers accounts of great chunks of ice, weighing as much as 300 pounds at times, that fall on different parts of the earth. Nobody seems able to explain where they come from. Apparently some phenomenon in nature produces great chunks of ice which occasionally fall upon the earth even in our own days.

Here is a terrible hail storm showing the awful cataclysms, the upheavals of nature during this time, a time when, according to Jesus, "men's hearts will fail them for fear at seeing the things that are coming to pass on the face of the earth." Further description of this can be found also in Ezekiel 39.

Now here is the good news: That is the end!

I want to breathe a sigh of relief at this point, don't you? John is going to pick up one event out of this scene, the destruction of Babylon the Great, and enlarge on it in the next two chapters. But in Chapter 19, Jesus will reveal himself; he will be seen by all the world, appearing in power and great glory, just as the Scriptures long have predicted.

As we close this chapter, we must ask ourselves, "What is God trying to say to us by all this?"

Remember, this book of Revelation was written for the seven churches, which stand for the whole church on earth today. What is this intended to say to us?

It is repeated several times in the chapter: Judgment does not produce repentance. It cannot; it never was intended to. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 2:4, "Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" {cf, Rom 2:4 NIV}. It is not judgment that will change our minds. Men often get more stubborn, more set upon evil, by judgment. But it is grace that changes the heart. Judgment removes and ends evil. Judgment cleanses society. Judgment enables a new beginning to come. But it does not change people's minds. No, for that you have to look to the grace of God, the mercy of God, the blessing of God, even the providence of God.

Some of you have formed the habit of leaving this service and going out to have a nice meal with your friends at some restaurant, or perhaps later this afternoon gathering with your family and doing something enjoyable together. Do you ever stop to think that those moments are only possible by the restraints of God upon the evil of man?

If human evil was allowed for one moment to be loosed among us; if people were allowed to do what they want to do in their hearts toward each other; we would be instantly plunged into terrible anarchy and murderous bloodshed. Nothing of the pleasantness of life would be possible to us.

God has sent anticipations of his judgments to us so we know what such judgments are like. We have seen enough of them to know how bad they will be. But it is God's grace that invites us to receive the Lord Jesus, to come to the One who took our place, who gave himself for us, not only to change us, and make us over anew, but to teach us how to live in the midst of a world gone mad!

That is what grace is for.

How grateful we ought to be for the present restraints of evil that God has ordained in our day!

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