

Praise for God's Eternal Reign

Revelation 11:15-19

November 14, 2021

We continue in *The Revelation of John*, again pausing at a moment of worship in heaven, the subject of the scripture selection. The lesson book discusses quite a bit more than just that scene, so I will go back and fill in what has been happening in John's vision after the previous passage in Chapter 7.

You may recall that as the seven seals of the scroll were opened, the end times began with the four horsemen appearing and dramatic signs of the end of the age. The scene of heavenly worship that John sees in Chapter 7 is an interlude between the sixth seal (6:12-14) when the sun turns black and the stars fall, and the seventh (and last) seal (in 8:1). You may be thinking, "Just one more catastrophe, then we get to the good part." Well, that's not how it worked. We read:

8:1 When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. 2 And I saw seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

So, what happens here, and also later, is that the seventh seal opens to reveal another sevenfold sequence of events, and ultimately the seventh trumpet will be sounded to commence a series of events culminating in the pouring out of seven bowls of God's wrath. Even at the seventh bowl, there are additional sevenfold elements of the vision concerning the fall of "Babylon," a symbolic substitute for Rome. Only after that do we get to the final battles, the millennium, and the Judgement. Only then do Chapters 21 and 22 give us the New Heaven and the New Earth. So, from Chapter 11, there is still a long way to go.

I'm going to skip over the first six trumpets. Suffice it to say that lots of bad things happened, bad for those left on earth that is, especially those not sealed by God. After the first four trumpets, an eagle flies over the scene announcing, "Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!" Not encouraging! After two of these three "woes," we read in 9:20 a remark about the purpose of all of these catastrophic events:

9:20 The rest of humankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands or give up worshiping demons and idols of

gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk. 21 And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their fornication or their thefts.

What did they need to do? In the eschatological passage of Joel, 2:30, we have:

³⁰I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. ³²Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

They need to call, in repentance, for the Lord to save them. But many will not.

That brings us to Chapter 11 and the “two witnesses.”

11 Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, “Come and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there,² but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months. ³And I will grant my two witnesses authority to prophesy for one thousand two hundred sixty days, wearing sackcloth.”

⁴These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth.

Yes, even after the catastrophes so far, there are still righteous people living on the earth. John was given a measuring stick to measure “the temple of God and those who worship there.” At this point, John seems to be on earth, not in the heavens any longer. This is the earthly temple, which will be destroyed. Often in the Bible, the act of measuring is a prelude for destruction. Examples are II Kings 21:13 and Amos 7:7-9.

But, in this case, it would seem those in the temple, who still worship God, are being protected, as those in the courts outside trample the holy city for 42 months. The two witnesses will bear testimony to God’s word. They are described both as two olive trees and as two lampstands. How can they be both? Well, this is a vision. The witnesses are to give testimony to God.

So, who are these two witnesses? Much of the Revelation uses “code words” to mask what is really being said. For example, “Babylon” really means “Rome.” To have circulated this document with Rome directly identified as the great harlot would have added to the dangers the Church already faced. Part of the challenge of trying to read *The Revelation* is that we may not be able to decode these masked references. People of that day may have understood, but we are two millennia removed. Even scholars who have studied that age extensively have difficulty. But, to get back to the question, the two lampstands seem to be Moses and Elijah. Moses likely represents The Law, and Elijah The Prophets. In the time of Jesus, “The Law and the Prophets” meant “The Holy Scriptures.” Thus, the Law and the Prophets still give witness to God for those who will repent and call on the Lord to save them. During those 42 months, 3 ½ years (half of seven years) they can’t be harmed. Then the beast from the bottomless pit, Satan, the Antichrist, will kill them. But after three and a half days, they rise and are taken up to heaven. There is a great earthquake, and the second “woe” is completed. That gets us to 11:15.

The Seventh Trumpet

15 Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah,^[a] and he will reign forever and ever.”

16 Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God,¹⁷ singing,

**“We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty,
who are and who were,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.**

**18 The nations raged,
but your wrath has come,
and the time for judging the dead,
for rewarding your servants,^[b] the prophets
and saints and all who fear your name,
both small and great,**

and for destroying those who destroy the earth.”

19 Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

Just as with the interlude at the sixth seal, there is a pause to revisit God in his throne room before the dragon and other beasts appear, and the bowls of wrath are poured out, and the final battles fought. What has changed? The two witnesses, the olive trees / lampstands, have been lost to the earth. Their witness is over. The power of God has been demonstrated for those who will see. 11:13b reads, “... **seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of Heaven.**” Does that mean that they repented and truly turned to God? If so, perhaps they were the last to do so. Because, with this scene in Chapter 11, God’s Kingdom has come. This is the moment that marks the end of the previous age.

There are still more events to happen on the earth. Nine more chapters, culminating in the Judgment. Perhaps that’s just God wrapping up the details. A lot of it is confusing, with symbolism that is hard to decipher. I can’t say I fully understand the details. But, it is clear that God is in control. Unlike many religions which see equally powerful and opposite good and evil fighting over the world, we believe in and bear witness to one supreme God who is righteous, just, and loving.

In a sense, the scenes in the Revelation seem to repeat. We see earthquakes multiple times. The stars fall from heaven at the sixth seal, but then we read of other stars falling later. Although we read the text linearly, perhaps that’s not the sequence of events being portrayed. I am reminded of the TV news reports on the Challenger disaster in 1991. They would play the video of the rocket going up, and then the explosion, and debris, over and over. Sometimes from one angle, or another, and sometimes starting earlier. I recall myself thinking, as I’d see one of those replays, “no, maybe not this time.” Of course, the disaster always happened. There had been just the one disaster, one time, but the visions of it kept repeating. Perhaps John’s vision of these things that are described, are not actually happening in that sequence, but are different views of a complex process, portrayed for him by God in a way that he could understand.

Added to this issue is that John, as a person of his time, seems to have an “astral” way of thinking. In that idea, events on earth are mirrored by events in the heavens. The clearest example of that is the woman and the baby and the beast of Chapter 12. This is the story of a mother giving birth to the divine child, Jesus, but in a heavenly rather than earthly context, as the devil, the dragon, tries to seize the child and kill it, just as Herod did. So, conflicts in heaven occur in these chapters just as on earth. That was a common way of viewing the cosmos at the time. Stars

represented both a being in the heavens, and an individual on earth, with both linked. Some of that kind of belief lingers on in our day in astrology. It does add confusion for the modern reader trying to make sense of *The Revelation*.

I will try to summarize what I see as the central message of this lesson, which focuses on that scene of heavenly worship at the seventh trumpet. It's the second part of verse 15:

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever.”

Does that sound familiar? Again, we can hear Handel's music, this time the famous and majestic Halleluiah Chorus. Is it any wonder that people stand when it is sung? The elders follow with their song and prayer of thanksgiving, thanking God for his final judgment on the righteous and the unrighteous.

For someone suffering under persecution, as were the early Christians in John's time, this end of the struggle is something to be longed for. John ends *The Revelation's* message with a prayer in Chapter 22:20b, **“The one who testifies to these things [Jesus] says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”** For John, and those under persecution in his day, the end of the age cannot come soon enough.

We in our day have a different perspective. Most of us here now are not in a hurry to see the end of our earthly lives. Cindy says that when she was a child, her mother would pray for the Second Coming. But Cindy didn't want that to happen; she had her whole life yet to live! Had Jesus come as soon as John was hoping, we would have never been. God in His wisdom has allowed the Creation to continue, to his glory, and to our greater amazement at the scope and magnificence of the Creation, and its amazing details and features, over the last two millennia. Even so, God is there for those who suffer and die. His faithful can be sure of the promises made by Jesus, and envisioned by John, God's care for His faithful.

Prayer: *We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and was and will be. Guide us now as we study your word that we grasp the power of your vision for us and the world you so love. Amen.*