

Revelation Bible Study #46

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Revelation 19:17-21

17 Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, “Come, gather for the great supper of God, **18** to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great.” **19** And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. **20** And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. **21** And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

Introduction

In what can only be described as the most brutal passage in Revelation, St. John describes the total slaughter of all nonbelievers upon the Return of Christ. It is certainly an act of justice carried out against those who have rebelled against God and persecuted the Church, but there is a lingering question of *why* this even must happen. The reader is left to contend with imagery that puts the standard narratives of the Parousia into question. Truly, Christ shall return just as He and the angels¹ and the Apostles all promised, but this shall not be a single instantaneous *moment* after which all men are judged. There are tasks which our Lord chooses to perform beforehand, in accordance with this text and His own teaching on the matter.

Vs.17-19

17 Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, “Come, gather for the great supper of God, **18** to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great.” **19** And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army.

As Christ returns, riding on a white horse, an angel stands in the sun, that is, being directly in front of it in the sky. The effect of this would be to cast a large shadow over the earth as he pronounces a terrible fate for all nonbelievers. Whether an angel shall manifest with a visible body or if this is a symbolic sign is beside the point; the larger point he's making is that judgment shall cover the entire earth. As the shadow of the angel blocks out the sun, the light of salvation is blocked off from all who refused to believe in the first place. It is for this reason that the birds of the air are called to devour the carcasses of every category of human being – that is to say, it is not *part* of unbelieving humanity that is being judged, but *all* of it. Here, the already-but-not-yet dynamic is present, albeit with a distinct application for nonbelievers; for them, every single death is deserved, a punishment from God which foreshadows the ultimate mass-killing which shall take place.

¹ Acts 1:10-11

That the birds of the air are called to eat the carrion of nonbelieving humanity is reminiscent of the judgment against Gog and Magog spoken to Ezekiel the prophet.² Gog and Magog are the world system and false religions, hence their utter destruction here. This same defeat is recounted in the next chapter of Revelation,³ and the attempt at war spoken of here is previously referenced in the seventeenth chapter,⁴ wherein the beast on which the harlot Babylon sits is equated to the beast from the sea. Gog, simply put, is the world system which *constantly* wars against Christ. But here, St. John repeats the judgment given regarding both figures; they shall die, and birds shall devour their flesh. Regarding their muster and march for war, it is true that the world system *always* gathers people together to war against Christ and His Church; whether there shall be a moment in which they gather in the sense of a military muster is yet to be seen.

Vs.20-21

20 And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. **21** And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

As previously spoken in this study series, the beast from the sea is the world system, the false prophet represents all false teachers, and the mark is persistent refusal to believe in the Gospel. For the beast and the false prophet to be *captured* then is equivalent to a halting of their operations. This is to say, the first order of business when Christ returns is a dismantling of all the machinery of persecution, false beliefs, and the self-idolatrous nature of man. Christ, Who is the truth,⁵ is effectively shown throwing lies into the lake of fire. In the material world, one may observe a great undoing; the halls of civic power being demolished in every country, false religious literature going up in smoke, etc. Mormon halls of worship will disappear, as will the encampments of anti-Christian militias like Boko Haram or ISIS.

Then all nonbelievers shall be reaped for judgment, just as previously promised.⁶ It will be the single largest mass-death event in history. This raises the question: why kill everyone that doesn't believe, if they are already to be judged? We have been conditioned, by way of oversimplification in catechesis, to suppose that when Christ returns, everyone will be merely *gathered* together, both the living and the dead, for judgment. This is *true*, but the killing is part of that judgment. In the parable of the minas,⁷ Christ specifically speaks thus concerning His enemies: "as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me." Before there is damnation, there is killing.

The promise of not experiencing death upon Christ's Return is reserved solely for believers. St. Paul teaches that what is commonly called the "Rapture" is shorthand for the resurrection of the living;⁸ since they have no need to have their bodies brought *back* to life, those Christians who witness the Parousia shall be immediately changed to the eternal state in their bodies. For everyone else, "it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment."⁹ Believers undergo this death first upon their Baptism, as St. Paul explains,¹⁰ and according to the promise of Christ they shall never die after.¹¹

2 Ezekiel 39:17-19

3 Revelation 20:7-10

4 Revelation 17:14

5 John 14:6

6 Revelation 14:19-20

7 Luke 19:11-27

8 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, 1 Corinthians 15:50-55

9 Hebrews 9:27

10 Romans 6:1-4

11 John 11:25

Shedding the mortal coil, being “killed,” etc., does not result in the same experience for a Christian as it does for a non-Christian. But for the nonbelievers, those who are alive during the time of the Return shall be slaughtered. They are not exempt from the curse upon mankind after the Fall in Eden, but shall have their turn experiencing the destruction of the body, the separation of the soul from it, and (given the announcement of judgment) a deep sense of dread.

The sword which comes from Christ's mouth is His Word, which is sharper than any two-edged sword.¹² Here, it is used offensively, for by Christ's pronouncements He gives out the sentence of death for all who defy Him. Though this may seem shocking to the reader, one must recognize that it is deserved on account of the death which *all* sin merits. But to those who do not wish to see this happen, especially to their loved ones, the Apostolic witness is “how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”¹³ It may well be that our Lord has given us this passage so as to motivate us to further complete the Church's Great Commission of bringing the Gospel to all humanity.

¹² Hebrews 4:12

¹³ Romans 10:15