

Last week we progressed to the mid-point of the Tribulation period. In chapter 11 of the Book of Revelation, as the seventh trumpet sounded, a number of proclamations were made. The first of these is the most significant: ***“The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!”*** NKJV (Rev 11:15). In the immediate context of the raising of the two witnesses (that the Anti-Christ had killed in Jerusalem) the statement affirms all that is to follow. If there is a sign of a coming season of divine intervention that would finally overcome evil once and for all, then this is the first sign of the change. The Lord will reign in heaven and on earth. If the Anti-Christ was to think that killing the two witnesses would be a demonstration of his power over God, then he will be seriously mistaken. Simultaneously, in a further divine act, the Shechinah Glory of God fills the Temple in Heaven and it is closed until the Bowl punishments are dispensed. This indicates to us the seriousness of what is about to happen.

The “Bowl Judgements”, comprising a further seven events, are now poured out on the earth. Firstly, sores affecting all those carrying the Mark of the Beast torment those of Satan. There has been much speculation as to what these marks of the beast are and where they will be. There are Marks of the Beast and Marks of the Son. Scripture makes it quite clear that these will be either on the forehead or on the right arm. These are divine marks not anything made by man. Those who have a great fear of modern technology, microchipping and the like, or anything else being the sign of the beast are well short of the mark. These are spiritual-physical signs that will occur only in this end time period and signs of the identification an individual has taken. They are signs that the destiny of the individual is already determined and Jesus, the Judge of the whole earth, alone knows when that point is achieved and then the marks will become apparent.

The second Bowl Judgement sees salt water turned to blood. This reflects the miracle that Moses demonstrated against Pharaoh in Egypt and reminds us that continued stubbornness against the will of God only has a bad outcome. As a consequence, all the sea creatures die and a significant source of humanity's food source perishes. The third Bowl Judgement sees a further continuation of this torment with all fresh water, all rivers and streams also being turned to blood. As if this were not bad enough the fourth Bowl Judgement sees that heat of the sun increase significantly – just at a time when thirst cannot easily be assuaged. The fifth bowl is a fourth worldwide blackout that signals the End of Times are upon the world and Babylon, the home and seat of demonic power on earth, is destroyed (we will come back to this shortly). The sixth bowl sees the Euphrates River dry up completely and the Third World War of the Tribulation begins. This is not a single war but a series of Battles that will see an absolute conclusion before this period ends.

Now you may be thinking: what happens to the Christians during this horrendous time? In this period the Christians leave Jerusalem and from all other parts of the world and seek refuge in a city where they will be protected divinely. Most Biblical researchers have come to the conclusion that this city of refuge for the Remnant of the church and Israel will be Petra in Jordan.

After a seventy-five day interval, the divine intervention that leads toward a final outcomes becomes more obvious. After three waves of desolations and the ongoing witness of the 144,000 many of the Jews who had rejected their Messiah finally come to their senses. They, particularly the

leadership in Israel, repent of their sin and rebellion against the Messiah and plead for Him to return - fulfilling the prophecies to that effect. This plea is responded to by Jesus, returning as He promised. Jesus now comes to lead His heavenly forces against the Anti-Christ in what is commonly called the "Battle of Armageddon". In fact, this is not a singular battle but a campaign, a running battle run from Bozrah to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. Let's now look at how this period unfolds in more detail ...

This campaign of Armageddon has, in itself, eight stages as are well outlined by Dr Arnold Fruchtenbaum, so we use his schema here. The first stage sees the assembling of the armies of the Anti-Christ in the Valley of Megiddo. This is a vast wide plain that is the traditional site of the "Battle of Armageddon". While that is happening the City of Babylon is divinely destroyed.

A little aside here: the city of Babylon was destroyed and for generations its site "lost" to history. It was generally understood that the city was gone to history and would never rise again. As a result, some biblical commentators understood that the words of Scripture should be treated allegorically rather than literally about the end times. But ancient Babylon was "re-discovered" and Saddam Hussein set about rebuilding the city, which he did quite successfully. During the Gulf War the American high command, recognising the Biblical significance of Babylon being re-established, commanded their forces not to bomb or damage the city. It is now a growing city you can go and visit. In the end times Babylon will be a place of growing and central evil and possibly, some have speculated, a major communications hub for that part of the world such as Singapore, Hong Kong or Qatar. We will have to wait and see. Irrespective, at the start of Armageddon, Babylon is destroyed.

In response, the third stage of Armageddon, Jerusalem itself is then fully overrun by the forces of evil, though in, real terms, it had been under the rule of the Anti-Christ for some time already. During this period, stage 4 now, the Christians flee to Petra (or Bozrah to use Petra's other name). They are pursued by the armies of the Anti-Christ but are safe at Petra. Simultaneously, seeing the calamity befalling Jerusalem, the Jewish leadership, as we noted, now repent and turn to call upon Jesus to return as their Saviour, their Messiah and Lord. This is stages 5 & 6.

Following Jesus return there are a major series of battles, though rather one sided now as Jesus burns His opponents. In the battle of the Valley of Jehoshaphat the Anti-Christ is slain by the Messiah. Jesus will then ascend in victory upon the Mount of Olives.

With Jesus return to Jerusalem the final Bowl Judgement will be poured out and a Great Earthquake, a fifth period of darkness and a massive hailstorm unlike anything in human history will strike. The final act decisive act will be the removal of the Abomination of Desolation from the Temple and from Israel. This is the end of the Tribulation and a new period, that of the Millennial Age, or more properly called, the Messianic Kingdom will begin.

This brings us through the Tribulation events in a straightforward manner.

It is useful then for us to consider something of the nature of prophecy. Turn with me to Revelation 12. This text is a classic example of both prophecy and apocalyptic prophecy. When God gives a vision of things to come it can cover a variety of time periods and not be clear how they overlap or the order they occur in. This is not unusual, in fact, it is more likely the norm. Prophecies also use a variety of allegorical and metaphorical forms that are not easy to interpret without a good knowledge of the culture and history. In the New Testament this was even more the case as Biblical

writers specifically didn't want the Roman Empire having a clear understanding of what was being said. When we look at Revelation 12 verses 1 to 5 we see a reference to a series of events that seem odd. Most commentators see in these verses a cosmological explanation as the stars align themselves in a particular fashion. It is this alignment that has pointed some Christian groups around the world to expect the Rapture to occur this weekend. Although, as has also been pointed out, it is actually impossible to see this alignment in the stars right now but is only "visible" by computer modelling. This would seem odd as a sign is meant to be seen. But maybe "seen" means known or understood so computer modelling advised to the world would be all that is necessary. You will see that the juxta-positioned verse six corresponds quite nicely to the period of the retreat of Christians to Petra during the Campaign of Armageddon.

In verses 7 to 9 we see the beginnings of the end from a divine perspective. Until this time Satan has not been cast entirely out of heaven. In Job and other places in the Scriptures we see Satan as the accuser of mankind, using human failure as a taunt against God *in* heaven. But now this presence of evil in heaven and on earth is ultimately dealt with. Verses 10-12 demonstrate the venomous anger of the devil having been cast out of heaven. He will vent his wrath against humanity and that there will be some, who by their faith and strength of character, will overcome even though they will be martyred in doing so. This will be a terrifying time for those who are on earth. If we think we have seen the worst of the devil we haven't. There is more to come in this final period as he enters his death throes.

Similarly, in Revelation 19, we are given the vision of the King of Kings who will return, no longer the Suffering Servant, but now the Conquering King coming to claim that which is His own. No longer in weakness, He comes in the strength and Holy righteousness that will bring judgement to the earth. All of us who love Him will rejoice at His return. But to those who are disobedient in heart, mind and action there will be terror. Hopefully for many this will lead to repentance but sadly, for many, it is only a precursor to what will come for them in eternity.

The key points here are that, although the text is shrouded from obvious view, it is explicit. There is a sequence of events and a timeframe that, as it unfolds becomes very obvious. The nature of the prophetic is not just of exhortation but also of specific events and an order that will happen – this is the Biblical test of a prophet. The reality of these events to come is the same as that of Jesus' life and the Cross. Many people did not believe it when Jesus came, even though the signs, the prophecies, were sufficiently clear for those who should have known. Nor will many believe as these end time events begin to happen in the world of today. These events will unfold, whether sooner or later is to be seen. But as we have said over the last two weeks, we should always be ready because Jesus' return can happen at any moment. And of course, for those who die, it happens effectively immediately for them. The question for us is not just are we ready ... but can we read the times correctly ...

Next week we continue as we see what happens in the Messianic Kingdom and how God will deal with evil decisively

Amen.

