

IN RESPONSE - THE MARK OF GOD (Revelation 7:1-8)

by Dennis Prutow

Volume V, Number 3

March, 1996

We've seen the gospel riding forth to victory (Revelation 6:1-2). Enemies intrude (Revelation 6:3-8). The saints in heaven look for the judgments of God to vindicate the gospel (Revelation 6:9-11). During this inter-advent period, God's judgments are ever present (Revelation 6:12-17). As Paul tells us in Romans 1:18, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." God shook heaven and earth at the first coming of Christ. He shook Israel and destroyed once for all the temple and its rituals. This was confirmed in 70 AD. The destruction of Jerusalem was a picture of the final conflagration and shaking at the final judgment. During this inter-advent period, God leads the church to triumph.

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree. And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads" (Revelation 7:1-3).

John now sees four angels at the four corners of the earth holding back four winds. This is a picture. The earth represents the world in a spiritual sense. The four winds are the winds of the earth. That is, they are the false teachings and false doctrines emanating from the camps of the world. Of course these false teachings are propagated by people consumed by the world and opposed to God. Paul urges change and steadfastness.

We are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming (Ephesians 4:14).

Human wisdom inevitably attempts to deceive, if possible, the very elect of God. "False Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and won-

ders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24).

However, the four winds are held back. The picture is similar to the binding of Satan portrayed in Revelation 20:2. The four winds are not permitted to harm the earth or sea. The latter represents the sea of worldly people and their tumultuous life. An angel with the seal of God comes from the rising of the sun. Malachi 4:2 promises, "But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall." And 2 Peter 1:19 reminds us,

We have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.

This is a great message of hope. The winds of evil doctrine cannot consume God's elect people. They must receive the mark and seal of God.

This seal is the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer molding the character. Ephesians 1:13 reminds Christians, "You were sealed in Him [Christ] with the Holy Spirit of promise." Ephesians 4:30 urges, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." A seal is a mark. Men and women sealed with the Holy Spirit have the mark of God. It is not physical but spiritual. Others see the mark as they observe the fruit of the Spirit cropping out in our lives.

We rightly understand baptism to be a sign and seal of our inclusion in the covenant of grace. Baptism pictures and symbolizes the work of the Spirit. The baptized person is marked by God, separated from the world.

John tells us more about those receiving the seal of God in verses 4-8.

And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand, the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of

Manasseh twelve thousand, the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand, the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand, from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand were sealed.

Numbers in Revelation are symbolic. Ten is a number of fullness. Ten times ten represents completeness. Twelve refers to the church. Revelation 21:9-21 describes the bride of Christ, the New Jerusalem. The city has twelve gates and twelve foundation stones. Each side of the city is twelve thousand stadia. The wall is one hundred and forty-four cubits high. This is a perfect city.

The one hundred and forty-four thousand are a picture of the church militant throughout history. The church is true Israel.

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God (Romans 2:28-29).

The text confirms this by placing Judah first in the list of tribes. Reuben was actually the firstborn son of Israel. However, because Christ came from the tribe of Judah, this tribe is listed first among all the tribes thus signifying the true nature of this list as the church. In addition, Levi was not numbered among the tribes receiving a portion of the promised land. Levi's inheritance was the Lord. The inclusion of Levi indicates this list also refers to spiritual Israel, the church, rather than physical Israel.

This church wages war against the dragon, the beast, the false prophet and the great harlot. "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

'In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1996 by Dennis Prutow.

IN RESPONSE - TRIBULATION AND GLORY (Revelation 7:9-17)

by Dennis Prutow

The scene turns to the church triumphant in heaven (Revelation 7:9-12).

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying, "Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen."

All heaven rejoices when salvation is applied to God's people and they are marked with the Holy Spirit. In the previous vision we saw one hundred and forty-four thousand. We now see a different picture. No one knows the number of God's elect.

These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished (Wesminster Confession of Faith 3:4).

However, God alone counts this multitude. The great Commission is fulfilled. Every tribe, tongue, people and nation is represented in heaven.

These people are "before the throne and before the Lamb" (verse 9). The first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3), is fulfilled in their lives. They are justified, having received the gift of Christ's righteousness; they are clothed in white robes. They are at peace with God; they have palm branches in their hands.

These saints have one message, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (verse 10). Salvation comes from God alone through Jesus Christ. "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

These saints rejoice in the salvation of God. They rejoice to see the advance of the church militant. Jesus puts it this way, I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Luke 15:7).

The angels of heaven add their assent to this cry. Amen, truly, they cry. "Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen." This is a seven-fold paean of praise. It is a hymn praising the perfection of God's Salvation through Jesus Christ, a perfect, full and glorious hymn.

In the vision, one of the twenty-four elders gathered around the throne turns to John to speak to him. Suddenly John finds himself in the midst of the heavenly gathering. He is in intimate conversation with one of the participants. John is one of the participants.

Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:13-14).

It is important to know who these saints in heaven really are. This seems to be the reason for the question posed to John. John defers to the elder who informs him they are tribulation saints.

Is this *the Great Tribulation* discussed so much by Futurists? I think not. We have a vision before us, a representation of reality but not reality itself. Jesus warns the church in Thyatira regarding her assent to those who lead astray

I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness and those who commit adultery with her into *great tribulation*, unless they repent of her deeds (Revelation 2:20-21, italics added).

From the perspective of John, this is present or imminent tribulation not distant or remotely future.

In Matthew 24 Jesus warns us false prophets will attempt to mislead us (verse 11). He tells us we will be delivered to tribulation (verse 9). This, says Jesus, is, among other portents, only the beginning (verse 8). Jesus pointedly confirms these words in John 16:33, "In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." The world is the place of great tribulation, turmoil and trouble. Christ also says, "But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved" (Matthew 24:13). We must all persevere under the trial of worldly tribulation. As James exhorts,

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).

The picture John sees is of saints who have gained the victory through perseverance. The elder therefore adds in Revelation 7:15-17,

For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.

The picture brings us to consummate glory. Compare Revelation 21:4 and 6. Glory comes through tribulation. This is the will and the way of God. Compare also Philippians 2:8-9.

The second great section of Revelation, chapters 4-7, closes with scenes of glory. The gospel is going forth. War, famine and death divert energy. Yet the church militant graduates to triumph and glory through perseverance in tribulation. 'In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1996 by Dennis Prutow.

IN RESPONSE - PRAYER AND JUSTICE (Revelation 8:1-5)

by Dennis Prutow

By now you suspect how I am interpreting Revelation. I am not a Futurist. The Futurist says all of Revelation beyond chapter three belongs to the era immediately preceding the second coming of Christ. I am also not taking the preterist position. The preterist insists the bulk of Revelation was fulfilled in the age of the infant church or in close proximity to it. All of the book except the very end is past. A third position, the historical, sees Revelation fulfilled in the early centuries of the Christian era.

Although I have preterist leanings, I am taking a philosophy of history approach to this book. I think it portrays the great forces at work in history under the hand of God. The book is God's story. It is the unfolding of His story issuing in the ultimate victory of Christ, of the gospel, and of God's people. In it we see the majesty of God. We are called to do so.

I am also taking the position this book repeatedly rehearses the victory of Christ in the gospel from differing perspectives. In this book we have a set of seven recitations. Such repetition or recapitulation is typical in biblical apocalypics.

As a novice, I find a handful of books speaking directly to Revelation especially helpful among the many commentaries from differing perspectives I am consulting. These are alphabetically: Patrick Fairbairn, *Prophecy*; Albertus Pieters, *The Lamb, The Woman and the Dragon*; James Ramsey, *Revelation, An Exposition of the First 11 Chapters*; Henry B. Swete, *Commentary on Revelation*; Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Apocalypics*; and Geoffrey B. Wilson, *Revelation*.

Revelation 8 begins the third part of this great book of visions encompassing chapters 8-11. Six seals of the book of God's decrees have been opened. The seventh releases the seven trumpets. Before the trumpets begin to sound, we see something startling. "When the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour" (Revelation 8:1).

Here we have a dramatic pause. All heaven is in awe of God, Jesus Christ, the divine purposes unfolding and the prospect of awesome events to come. The moment of silence, half an hour as compared to eternity, accentuates the drama.

It is a time, as Psalm 46:10 exhorts, to, "Be still, and know that I [am] God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth." Here, all heaven pauses to contemplate the Almighty. This is a great Selah in the song of heaven.

In the same breath John says, "And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them" (Revelation 8:2). The seven angels, although not previously mentioned, have apparently been present before the throne of God. The picture is gradually filled with divinely appointed participants in the heavenly drama. We see this even before the seven angels sound their trumpets.

Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne (Revelation 8:3).

The image is actually an angel standing over the altar of incense. This altar is symbolic of prayers ascending before the face of God. The angel adds much incense to the prayers of God's people, an image of the intercession of Christ. We dare not go before God in our own names. Our prayers are feeble, imperfect, mixed with sin. Christ's intercession perfects our prayers and makes them a sweet smelling savor before God. "And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand" (Revelation 8:4).

What is the content of these prayers? The next verse gives us a hint.

Then the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar, and threw it to the earth; and there followed peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake (Revelation 8:5).

The angel throws fire from the altar on the earth. The earth symbolizes the world as a spiritual system opposed to God. The devil is the god of this untoward kingdom (2 Corinthians 4:4). The fire is the fire of judgment. The thunder, lightning and earthquake represent the judgments of God brought against the earth.

This is the picture. What is the meaning? The interpretation, it seems to me, is quite simple. The prayers of God's people

are part of the means used by God to bring about His glorious purposes. We know means are never disconnected from ends. For example, if people are to be converted to faith in Christ, and we know they are, we must proclaim the gospel to the lost. Means and ends are always coupled.

How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? (Romans 10:14).

In this case, the prayers of God's people are part of the means used by God to bring judgment upon evil and evil doers.

We see something similar under the heading of the fifth seal in Revelation 6:9-10.

When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"

The saints under the altar of burnt offering represent all whose sins are covered by the blood of Christ. In the vision they cry to God in prayer seeking God's justice. They want the scales of justice and righteousness set right.

The application is simple. The prayers of God's people are part of the means used by God to bring about His ends. Part of His will involves the glorious salvation of His people. God also wills the punishment of those who obstinately and maliciously oppose Him and His Christ. Prayer for perfect justice to be meted out is prayer in accordance with God's will. Such prayer ought to be uttered. Such prayer must be voiced. We must pray for the brandishing of the sword of God's judgment. Such prayer will be answered (1 John 5:14-15). The incense rising before God is in part our prayers.

'In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1996 by Dennis Prutow. Articles may be reproduced for use in church school classes.

IN RESPONSE - THE TRUMPETS SOUND (Revelation 8:6-11)

by Dennis Prutow

Once the prayers of God's people rise to heaven, warning shots are fired across the bow of 'good' ship earth. Remember, the earth represents the world system opposed to God. Warnings of impending doom *now* resonate through the earth. "And the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound them" (Revelation 8:7). Once the stage is set for this act of the drama, the seven angels prepare to sound their warnings.

I say these are warnings of impending doom because the seven trumpets remind us so much of the people of Israel invading Jericho in Joshua 6:6-9.

Joshua the son of Nun called the priests and said to them, "Take up the ark of the covenant, and let seven priests carry seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark of the Lord." Then he said to the people, "Go forward, and march around the city, and let the armed men go on before the ark of the Lord." And it was so, that when Joshua had spoken to the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets of rams' horns before the Lord went forward and blew the trumpets; and the ark of the covenant of the Lord followed them. The armed men went before the priests who blew the trumpets, and the rear guard came after the ark, while they continued to blow the trumpets.

As Israel circled Jericho, no one spoke. However, seven priests blew seven trumpets as the people marched around the city once a day for six days. What went through the minds of the people of Jericho? They knew the stories of God's work in redeeming Israel (Joshua 2:8-11). The people of Jericho feared Israel and were fully warned of the impending catastrophe. On the seventh day, the warnings complete, God gave the city to Israel. Joshua 6:15-16 rehearses what took place.

Then on the seventh day they rose early at the dawning of the day and marched around the city in the same manner seven times; only on that day they marched around the city seven times. At the seventh time, when the priests blew the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, "Shout! For the Lord has given you the city."

We see a parallel when the seventh trumpet sounds in Revelation and the original Hallelujah Chorus is sung.

Then the seventh angel sounded; and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). These words apply to Jericho, to our day and to the end of the age.

Revelation 8:7,

The first sounded, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were thrown to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. The trumpet blasts remind us of the plagues sent upon Egypt. Those plagues warned the people and gave them opportunity to repent. The same is true here. Revelation 9:20-21 laments,

The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk; and they did not repent of their murders nor of their sorceries nor of their immorality nor of their thefts.

As for the first plague, once again the earth represents the world as a spiritual entity opposed to God. The trees and grass are the fruit of the world, institutions built on atheistic presuppositions. Such institutions are set on self-destruct. Modern education and social structures built on ungodly principles leave in their wake a host of destroyed lives. Abortion abounds. Suicide is the second highest cause of death among teenagers. This is a clear warning sounded by God unheeded by educators and social engineers.

The second angel sounded, and something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea; and a third of the sea became blood, and a third of the creatures which were in the sea and had life, died; and a third of the ships were destroyed (Revelation 8:8-9).

Mountains often represent kingdoms and nations in Scripture. The casting of

this mountain into the sea may represent the dissolution of governments. They melt into the sea of nations. A wake of dislocation and destruction follows.

Ancient examples abound. The disintegration of the USSR seems to me to be a contemporary one. This atheistic power collapsed and much turmoil has followed, physical and spiritual. Unfortunately, many cults have moved in to fill the spiritual void. This too is a warning. Atheistic power cannot stand.

The third angel sounded, and a great star fell from heaven, burning like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of waters. The name of the star is called Wormwood; and a third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died from the waters, because they were made bitter (Revelation 8:10-11).

Stars are often messengers of God. In Revelation 1:20 the seven stars are no doubt the pastors of the seven churches. A star which falls is ecclesiastical power on the descent, perhaps teachers of the Word falling from a proper understanding of Scripture. Such persons pervert the Word and lead people astray. The waters of life within the church are embittered. They no longer provide spiritual health and vitality. They lead poor souls to eternal death. Such is the case in our modern world where political correctness supersedes biblical correctness. Falling stars are a warning from God.

A final word is in order regarding the figure of one third found in verses 7, 8 and 10. Under the third and fourth seals, the horsemen are given authority over a fourth of the earth. What is the difference under the seven trumpets? As men and women refuse to heed the judgments and warnings of God, He ups the ante. These judgments and warnings become more severe. This is true on both corporate and individual levels. The Word of God in application is simple. "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

'In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1996 by Dennis Prutow.