

Revelation 19:17-21 “The Shortest War to End the World”

Dr. Jeffery L. Hamm, PhD

ChristChurch Presbyterian, Atlanta

The shortest war in recorded history was the Anglo-Zanzibar War which was waged on an island of the east coast of Africa that is part of modern country of Tanzania. The war occurred between Great Britain and the Zanzibar Sultanate on August 27, 1896. The cause of war was the death of the pro-British sultan who was succeeded by Sultan Khalid bin Barghash. A ruler of whom the British authorities did not approve. The British sent Khalid an ultimatum to stand down and evacuate the palace. The ultimatum expired at 9:00 AM East Africa Time. At 9:02 the Brits attacked and fire ceased at 9:46. A forty-four-minute war. The shortest of recorded history.

In our text, we have a war. Not the shortest of history, but the shortest war to end history. When we examine the text we learn that *because Christ conquered the cosmos at the cross, then you should surrender to Him that you might not perish but have everlasting life.*

Context

It is AD 95-96, the Apostle John is banished from Ephesus and exiled to the prison island of Patmos. There he finds himself in solitary confinement, isolated from the other political prisoners because of his revolutionary message about a dead Nazarene who claimed to be king of the world now, according to John, risen from the dead. John is cut off from the churches he loves. Has no Christian community. He doesn't know what lies before him. The lonely and bitter experience assails and attacks his faith. So to John are given these glorious visions which unveil hope for first century Christians living in the Roman Empire.

Brilliantly interwoven through the visions is a subplot, an underlying narrative that explains why the early Church is suffering through such terrible tribulation, why Christianity invites such hostility today in China, Iran, Saudi Arabia. The subplot begins in chapter 12 where we see move behind the scenes of human history to behold a cosmic conflict. There the Dragon, the Serpent of old, Satan is unable to abort the birth of the Male-Child, the Christ Child. And consequently is conquered by Christ's death, descent into hell, resurrection. Enraged at his defeat, the furious Dragon turns all of his hatred, malice, and wrath *against those who hold to the testimony of Jesus* (12:17). He persecutes Christians with the intention of eradicating the Church from the face of the earth. For that diabolical purpose, the Dragon recruits the aid of two cohorts in crime. The Beast, the False Prophet. The Beast is the personification of the secular state set in opposition to God. An anti-god government. Popularized by the False Prophet, the personification of false prophesy, a false news narrative, the state news network that deludes the masses into wholeheartedly pledging allegiance to the global anti-god government. To lend further aid to the Beast's sinister strategy, a convenient marriage is arranged. A power marriage to strengthen the Beast's regime. The daughter of the Dragon is given away as a bride for the Beast. Her name, Babylon, the Great Whore of world. Who seduces the inhabitants of the earth away from the God Who Is There to the worldliness of the age further empowering the persecution the church. Tragically, over time the Beast begins to loath his bride. He is sickened by her, hates her, eventually turns against Babylon, murders her then mutilates her body.

Here in our text it is the Beast himself who is now threatened. His life suddenly, unexpectedly endangered by the One who emerges on the horizon of history. The Rider on the

White Horse. Who is He? The White Rider is the Male-Child, the ChristChild, whose birth highlights the cosmic conflict. Now He returns. Not as He appeared in His first coming as a vulnerable baby which grows into a Man of Sorrows rejected and despised. But as the Messiah of the Old Testament, the Ultimate Warrior-King of prophecy. Who returns to wage war against the Beast.

Many readers would question the outcome of the war. Who will be the winner? After all, the Beast rules the world. The kings of the earth have allied themselves with his kingdom. The Beast controls the global government. He controls the COVID vaccine. He has the power to lock down the economy, to close public schools, to shut sanctuaries. Indeed, no one can buy or sell without the mark of the beast. The question the world asks, *Who is like the beast and who is able to wage war against him?* (13:4). Who shall emerge victorious? The question is totally irrational for the reason which we saw last week. The White Rider's appearance assures His victory. His head is crowned with many diadems. His eyes blaze like fire. He wields in His hand a rod of iron rod with which to shatter the nations. His garments are dyed with the blood of His enemies. Blood spattered upon His clothes from slaying His enemies in brutal battle. But if there is any lingering doubt, it is removed in the Declaration of War. The announcement of war.

The Great Supper of God

Verse 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."* John sees an angel standing in the sun. From this solar eclipse position of blinding splendor, he issues a declaration of war. The most unusual, unique declaration ever given. Because it is a summons to a supper. Who are the guests? Not those who dwell on the earth, *...all the birds that fly directly overhead*. Literally, the zenith. Birds circling the zenith of the earth. Not Canadian geese at high altitude migrating southward. These are birds of prey: eagles, falcons, hawks, vultures, in search of supper. Now invited to the *great supper of God*. The Greek is in the genitive case which shows possession. The feast is called the *supper of God* because it hosted by God, catered by God.

What kind of supper would God provide? What is on the menu? Man-flesh. Verse 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.*" Notice the word *flesh* is repeated five times for emphasis. The ESV provides an excellent translation here. Others, NIV, smooths over for good English and uses the word only twice to modify all 5 types of men. The repetition is there for a reason, emphasis. Moreover, the Greek uses the word in its plural form which makes the picture all the more graphic. The *fleshes* of kings, the *fleshes* of captains the *fleshes* of mighty men, the *fleshes* of riders...Fleshes (plural) are pieces of flesh, torn fleshes, ripped, cut off from the body. That is the entrée, pieces (plural) of human flesh. A horrific meal of vast human carnage offered as a feast for the fowl of the air.

What does this mean? "To remain unburied for the pleasure of the predators was considered by the ancients to be an ignominious fate" (Mounce, 358). No worse disgrace conceivable. Do you remember Goliath's threatening taunt to David, *Come to me, I will feed your flesh to the birds of the sky* (1 Sam. 17:44). To refuse burial, to leave the body of one's enemy exposed for the birds of the air is the greatest act of dishonor. So the Outlaw Jose Wales affirms, "Buzzards gotta eat too." Furthermore, that the corpses remain unburied reveal the extent of the carnage, the scope of human devastation. That the bodies remain unburied means

that there is no one left alive to dig the graves. They are all dead, no survivors. Universal dishonor, comprehensive judgment. Providing a gruesome “All-you-can-eat-buffet” of human flesh. The Supper of God. There is not a grimmer contrast to the wedding Supper of the Lamb. There are two suppers at the end of the world. Two alternative destinies. One, the Wedding Supper of the Lamb to which the redeemed are called. The other, the Supper of God at which those who received the mark of the beast are the feast. Here is this invitation to a supper issued to the birds of prey in order that they might gorge themselves on the corpses of all the enemies of the White Rider soon to be lying exposed, unburied on the field of battle. Could any other image show with greater clarity the outcome of the war? Any doubt regarding who shall emerge victorious?

Some people get a little squeamish at this picture. They complain that it smacks of something one might read in the Old Testament. Precisely. This is a direct reference to Ezekiel’s oracle against Gog. ¹⁷ *“As for you, son of man, thus says the Lord GOD: Speak to the birds of every sort and to all beasts of the field, ‘Assemble and come, gather from all around to the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you, a great sacrificial feast on the mountains of Israel, and you shall eat **flesh** and drink blood. ¹⁸ You shall eat the **flesh** of the **mighty**, and drink the blood of the **princes** of the earth... ¹⁹ And you shall eat fat till you are filled, and drink blood till you are drunk, at the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you. ²⁰ **And you shall be filled at my table ... charioteers, with mighty men and all kinds of warriors,**’ declares the Lord GOD (Ezek. 39:17-20).* The supper predicted by Ezekiel is the supper that John now sees. The Supper of God. The same supper provided by the same God who works the same way both in redemption and judgment from the Old Testament to the New.

I stress this because of this idea afloat which asserts, “This doesn’t harmonize with the teaching of Jesus, the ethic of Jesus. The God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath, judgment. In the New Testament, He is the God of love.” As if God decided to change and act respectably like a gentleman. But we must question this idea of a changing God. For change is indicative of an imperfection. Either He was imperfect and changed for the better. Or He was perfect and changed for the worse. Yet God by definition is unchangeable, immutable, in His Being (SC #4). He is not like a man that He would change. He is God! The God of the Old Testament is a God of infinite love who therefore promises salvation from the beginning of the world through the Male-Child Seed of the woman who would be born to crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). Who identifies Himself to Moses as *“The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; ⁷ who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin”* (Exod. 34:6-7 NAS). The God of the New Testament is a God of wrath, and He quenches His wrath either upon Christ Crucified or upon His enemies. The wrath which He quenches upon Christ crucified is that which would be otherwise directed at those who believe in Christ, thereby paying the penalty for their sin. The wrath of God the whole context of salvation. What does it mean to be saved? From what is one saved? Depression? Anxiety? That message could merely be that a secular psychology. According to Christianity, that from which we are saved is the burning wrath of a holy God. The unchanging God who finally provides here in the New Testament the very same supper that He promises in the Old Testament because He is the same God. The God who shall not be mocked. Who masterfully orchestrates and overrules the evil agendas of evil men so that their schemes ultimately backfire thereby ensuring that they are brought together for the Supper of God.

Isn't wrath unfair? No. As we have seen over and over, those who receive the wrath of God are those who get exactly what they want. Those hardened in defiance of God who don't want to repent of their unbelief. They don't want to stand in awe of God and worship and adore Him as He deserves and demands. Instead they freely choose to reject Him and live in denial of Him. Finally, they get what they so deeply desire, unrestrained hostility, open war with God.

The Recapitulation of the Battle of Armageddon

So the battle begins. Verse 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.* Before we look at the details of war, we would do well to ask, "Which war is this?" World War Three? Four? How do we know? ESV reads, *to make war.* In the Greek text, the definite article precedes the word "war." So it literally reads "*the War.*" The one we should already know about. Throughout the *Apocalypse* we read a lot about war, but in only three places do we find *the War.* Here in chapter 19, then again in chapter 20 we'll see the same war. The war that we have already seen in chapter 16 (v. 16) which is enjoined on the field of battle that in Hebrew is called *Armageddon.* This is the same war. The battle of Armageddon. Clearly, for in this verse there are two other parallels connecting this war to battle of Armageddon. First, the combatants. The Beast and whom? ...*the kings of the earth.* Who was on the battlefield of Armageddon? ...*the kings of the whole world* (16:14). Second, the same verb is employed, *gathered.* What do we read of Armageddon? *to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty* (16:14 NIV). When John sees the armies of the Beast arrayed against the Rider on the White Horse and His army, John sees the final battle, the battle of Armageddon.

As we have belabored repeatedly, the *Revelation* must be read as a series of recapitulating visions, parallel visions that span the same timeframe from the 1st coming of Christ to His 2nd coming (Augustine). Like watching a baseball game. Bottom of the ninth, scored tied. The runner slides into home plate. A close call, so we watch the replay which shows the play from a different camera angle. But when we watch the replay, we don't imagine ourselves watching a entirely different game, but the same play from a different angle of the camera. That is how to read the *Revelation.* As a series of 7 parallel visions which provide a different camera angle of the same spiritual war. The visions provide different vantage points overlooking the same spiritual battle. If try to read as chronological sequence, then we are confronted with insurmountable contradictions. For example, in chapter 16, at Armageddon we read of *the war.* In which all the kings of the earth are gathered together. *for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.* The war to end all wars and usher the close of history after which follows the final judgment. Which presents an interpretive problem if we read as sequential narrative. How could we have in chapter 19, the final battle that ends the world, had the final battle already been waged in chapter 16? If we read it as consecutive sequence, then forced to problematic interpretations. Like, one war against the defiant Gentiles, one against defiant Jews. Another against those coming out of the millennial reign of Christ. But if seen through recapitulating visions then it becomes easily understandable. Parallel visions, taking us deeper into the eternal plan of God. Here we have a different angle of the camera, showing the battle of Armageddon. Chapter 19 zooms-in for a close up shot of the destruction of the Beast and False Prophet. Chapter 20, same war, different camera angle, focuses exclusively on destruction of the Dragon. Here in chapter 19 is the slow-motion replay of the fate of the Beast and False Prophet.

The Brevity of the Battle Reveals the Power of the Cross

Notice the description of the battle. Verse 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.* The Greek word for *captured* means “to lay hold of with hostile intent.” The Beast and the False Prophet are seized. Then what happens? *These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur.* Where they shall forever suffer torment. To be joined by the Dragon in chapter 20. But for now, let’s focus on the description of the battle. Notice the details of warfare. There are none. It is over, instantly, immediately. In one moment, John sees the Beast and False Prophet leading this international coalition arrayed against the helpless Church, surrounded on every side, pressed in. The next moment, they are cast into the lake of fire. In the blink of an eye, they’re gone. It is done. Game over. The war is not a tug-of-war, back-and-forth type scenario. Invade, retreat; attack, counter attack. “This battle of Har-Magedon is not a protracted struggle with now this, and then that, side winning...No,...By the ‘manifestation of His presence’ He vanquishes His enemies (Hendricksen, 183). The instantaneous brevity highlights the point. The enemies of the White Rider are found utterly powerless in His presence. He overwhelms them by the pervasive power of His presence alone. The might of His Being. It’s over immediately.

Is that disappointing? I fear that our apocalyptic expectations have been molded and shaped more by Hollywood than Scripture. We have seen one apocalyptic movie after another. *The Planet of the Apes, Terminator, Mad Max, The Book of Eli.* After a suspenseful nail-biting, seat-clinching struggle, the hero-savior barely prevails over the enemy. Incidentally, his goal is only the preservation of humanity. Never the radical transformation of humanity into a new race to live out the adventure of eternal life at the Wedding Supper of the Lamb on the New Earth. But the simple preservation of a broken human race still in bondage to depravity and death. Which is marginally secured by the hero-savior just barely prevailing over his rogue enemy. The plot is totally influenced by the ancient pagan idea of dualism, not Scripture. Dualism, the idea that there two immortal beings up in the sky, one good, one evil. Both equal in power, locked in immortal combat, slugging it out in a cosmic contest until one is finally left standing. But until that end, we are left gripped in suspense not knowing who might win. That’s dualism. There is no dualism in the Bible. God and Satan are not equal. The Lord He is God, *to whom would you liken Him? To what would you compare Him? Do you not know? Have you not heard? It is He who sits enthroned above the circle of the earth* (Isa. 40:18, 21-22). God is the infinite Creator, Satan a finite creature. A vapor in God’s sight. There is no contest, no competition. There never has been, there never shall be. So when the Rider on the White Horse emerges upon the field of battle, there is no fight, no combat, no drama.

It would be impossible. The outcome of the battle has already been decided. In chapter 5, John is given a glorious glimpse of God on His throne, holding in His right hand a scroll sealed with seven seals, the book of destiny. John begins to weep because no one is found worthy to take the scroll and open it. Then one of the elders says, *Weep no more!* “Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah...has conquered, so that He can open the scroll and its seven seals (Rev. 5:5). So John turns to expecting to the Lion, instead he sees a Lamb as though it had been slain. Christ conquered at the cross. What Paul writes to the Colossians. ¹⁵ *And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross* (Col 2:15 NIV). Jesus has already won the battle at the cross. “Therefore, at His return there is no fight, no clash, so suspense, only the final application of His victory already won at

the cross” (Azurdia). Christ’s return by itself, validates the conclusion already established at the cross. We never go beyond the cross, we only go deeper into it.

Do you see what the picture shows us? The undramatic instantaneous brevity of the battle displays the power of the cross so that at the return of the King, the hearts of His enemies will melt and shrink and petrify at the overwhelming power of His glorious presence which was secured at the cross. The war already won at the cross, so the Beast and False Prophet are overcome instantly. He returns and orders one single command. It is what we have sung 100 times. “The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo! His doom is sure; one little word shall fell him.” Amen.