

Revelation

*Part Twenty-Five
An Altar of Atonement and Judgment
(Revelation 9:13-21)*

With Study Questions

310)

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
212-6999
pastorpaul@branchofhope.org
www.branchofhope.org
2/6/2022*

Revelation

Part Twenty-Five

An Altar of Atonement and Judgment

(Revelation 9:13-21)

Then the sixth angel sounded: And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, ¹⁴ saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." ¹⁵ So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, were released to kill a third of mankind. ¹⁶ Now the number of the army of the horsemen *was* two hundred million; I heard the number of them. ¹⁷ And thus I saw the horses in the vision: those who sat on them had breastplates of fiery red, hyacinth blue, and sulfur yellow; and the heads of the horses *were* like the heads of lions; and out of their mouths came fire, smoke, and brimstone. ¹⁸ By these three *plagues* a third of mankind was killed – by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which came out of their mouths. ¹⁹ For their power is in their mouth and in their tails; for their tails *are* like serpents, having heads; and with them they do harm. ²⁰ But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk. ²¹ And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts (Revelation 9:13-21).

Introduction

In a conversation with an outspoken, smart, yet unbelieving friend, we were commiserating over a horrible trial that a mutual friend has been enduring. Not one to miss the opportunity to take a jab at religion, my friend rhetorically asked, "How can you believe in God when this kind of stuff happens?" Seeking to move the conversation from philosophical (which I am not opposed to) to existential, my response was, "How can you not?"

Recognizing that we are always in flux, always moving one way or another, the trials and tribulations in which we find ourselves can yield a

shaking fist at God or a running into the arms of God to find refuge under His wings (Psalm 91:4). One direction is eternal peace and bliss, the other is judgment.

A great tribulation was under way in the land (Revelation 1:9) and it was about to get worse (Revelation 2:22). The churches receiving this letter (truly all churches) needed to know that the true and ultimate deliverance from all tribulation is found in Christ. These churches would be tempted to imitate the darkness by which they found themselves surrounded. How would our Lord aid them?

Through John we would, in chapter one, behold the glory of Christ, **“the ruler over the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5)**. Then these seven churches would receive individual care and warning in chapters two and three. After this John shares His vision of the heavenly throne room, where Christ is worshiped as Creator and Redeemer in chapters four and five.

We also read of a sealed scroll which contains the message of the judgments which are about to fall, a judgment which will also serve to protect the church and its advancement of the redemption that is found in Christ. The seven seals are finally opened and then there are seven trumpets of judgment. We are now at the sixth trumpet.

Then the sixth angel sounded: And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God... (Revelation 9:13).

We are again reminded of the divine nature of these judgments, with a reference to the **“altar”**. Let us also be reminded that the means by which these judgments transpire is via **“the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar” (Revelation 8:3)**. These are prayers that God would bring justice (Revelation 6:10). As she reflected upon the Christ within her womb, Mary poetically anticipates this justice in *The Magnificat*:

And His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered *the* proud in the imagination of their hearts. ⁵² He has put down the mighty from *their* thrones, And exalted *the* lowly (Luke 1:50-52).

One of the accomplishments of the Messiah would be to sort things out in history. John through the **“sixth angel”** is about to record a major chapter in this reckoning.

Not only does the altar bring our thoughts to the prayers and the divine force behind these events, but the altar is also a place where safety might be found. Adonijah, in his fear of Solomon **“took hold of the horns of the altar” (1 Kings 1:50)**. An altar is a place of divine sacrifice for atonement-where our sins are paid for. **“Horns”** represent power.

Like so many things we see in Scripture regarding our interactions with God (e.g., the Lord’s Supper), there is nothing tepid about the waters of the living God. They quench or drown. We are saved by what takes place on the altar or we are judged via the same altar. We must be careful as a church, in our efforts to be welcoming and relevant (which we should be) that we not become so casual in our worship, that we lose how dangerous it can be to come before the living God.

I recall my friends who went to Viet Nam speaking about their compromised position (one friend spent nine hours in a rice paddy), then hearing, sometimes feeling, helicopters. I remember suggesting how good that must have felt. They would often respond that it depended upon whose helicopters they were. The right helicopter interacts positively with the right uniform.

In the above metaphor, the uniform is the **“seal of God” (Revelation 9:4)**. To those who believe in Christ it is granted to stand in **“the great day of His wrath” (Revelation 6:17)**. The event of Revelation 9 happened in history, but it provides a great lesson on standing in the final judgment. Out of the four horns we hear words...

...saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.”¹⁵ So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, were released to kill a third of mankind (Revelation 9:14, 15).

We will once again be provided with extraordinary interpretations of this passage. The image given is of four angels being, as it were, held back like a thoroughbred in a starting gate, chomping at the bit to be released. They have **“been prepared”** for this very moment. To what extent they knew they had been prepared, it is difficult to say. John may be appealing to the decree of God and His providence. Those under the wings of the

Almighty (Psalm 91:1-4) can take great comfort in knowing that none of this is random or taking God by surprise.

What is the significance of the **“great river Euphrates?”**

The more popular and sensational view is that this is where Red China will unleash its army of 200 million. The “yellow peril” as it was called, would mobilize its ballistic missile launchers. This chapter, it is said, speaks of thermonuclear war, a melted earth, a full invasion of the entire western world, radioactive fallout, and debris, etc.¹

A less fantastic view suggests that the sixth angel changes men into devils and that John is describing all wars, past, present, and future. Even the very reputable William Hendriksen (holding the amil/idealist view) offers that this chapter speaks of war tools, tanks, cannons, and battleships.

There is great application and comfort for believers in every age as we read of the unveiling of God’s divine hand here in Revelation. Similar to other books in the Bible, it tells us how God works and how we should respond, especially in times of conflict and tribulation. But there are too many markers in Revelation indicating a specific historical event is being prophesied, to spread this out over the course of the entire New Covenant.

If we view the Euphrates, not from a newspaper or even secular history books, but from Scripture, what do we learn?

On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates (Genesis 15:18).

The location from which these destructive angels will be released marked the northeast border of the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 11:24; Joshua 1:4). It is the longest river in western Asia (1700 miles), and it was the boundary between Israel and its enemies². And now, instead of being the secure northern border, it would turn and be a flood on Israel itself (Isaiah 8:5-8). Once again, we see this reversal of fortune. Israel had taken the place of its enemies and its attending judgments.

¹ John Walvord (President of Dallas Seminary) apparently shared this view with Time Magazine. It was also made popular by Hal Lindsey.

² It was also the boundary of the Roman Empire separating it from the Parthian Empire.

But if one is inclined to search history, it is remarkable that four legions of Romans awaiting the green light to invade Jerusalem and, as Jesus foretold, destroy the temple, waited for their orders stationed at the Euphrates.³

The more local nature of this judgment (though Rome was often referred to as the whole world. E.g., Romans 1:8) might be questioned with the language that a **“third of mankind”** were killed. As discussed earlier, if it was the final judgment, it would not be merely a third. A third may have been referring to the inheritance laws in Israel (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). Also, a strict translation, as in Young’s Literal is **“the third of men”** or **“the third of the men.”**

Now the number of the army of the horsemen was two hundred million; I heard the number of them. ¹⁷ And thus I saw the horses in the vision: those who sat on them had breastplates of fiery red, hyacinth blue, and sulfur yellow; and the heads of the horses were like the heads of lions; and out of their mouths came fire, smoke, and brimstone. ¹⁸ By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed – by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which came out of their mouths. ¹⁹ For their power is in their mouth and in their tails; for their tails are like serpents, having heads; and with them they do harm (Revelation 9:16-19).

A great deal is made of these four verses, as mentioned, regarding the worldwide, thermonuclear devastations along with an army of 200 million soldiers, which China apparently reached in 1961. These things are fascinating enough to write novels and make movies, but I would argue have no significance regarding this passage of Scripture.

What this actually speaks of though is much more significant. The Old Covenant was coming to an end. God would preserve His people and begin to grant that great victory over the evil which had covered the earth (1 John 5:19). The New Covenant would begin, the churches detractors moved aside that the **“mustard seed”** might sprout and become **“larger than all the garden plants”** (Matthew 13:31, 32). And, as expressed by the large number, nothing could stop it.

One might point out that at the time of the writing of Revelation, 200 million may have been (give or take) the population of the entire earth.

³ Josephus, Wars 7.1.3

How then could be this fulfilled in the first century? Of course, there would have been fewer inhabitants of the earth when David wrote:

The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary (Psalm 68:17).

In that Psalm, David is celebrating his victories over his enemies. David is offering a display of God's divine power in those victories. Once again, we see apostate Israel on the receiving end of that which once defended them. Let the modern, liberal, apostate church beware!

Much can be said addressing the symbolism of these horses and their riders. Over and against nuclear weapons, modern tanks, and nerve gas, let's examine Scripture to help us obtain the meaning. Just a couple of examples:

Speaking of the Chaldeans rising up to punish the sins of Judah, we read:

Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour (Habakkuk 1:8).

Referring to the strength of the Gadite warriors, we read:

From the Gadites there went over to David at the stronghold in the wilderness mighty and experienced warriors, expert with shield and spear, whose faces were like the faces of lions and who were swift as gazelles upon the mountains (1 Chronicles 12:8).

Though I think it is a mistake to relegate all of these things to that which is immaterial, further study could most assuredly be pursued regarding how these very concrete judgments are described. The lying prophet, for example, is called "**the tail**" (Isaiah 9:15) and a serpent is one who utters lies (Genesis 3:1).

We can conclude from these images that the devastations were not merely physical. It wasn't as if in a land of truth, evil was an uninvited

interloper. The consequences of the rejection of the true God results in being under the reign of a false god and a dark madness ensue. Israel's desire to be like other nations is recorded in 1 Samuel. It is there we read:

And Samuel prayed to the Lord. ⁷ And the Lord said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸ According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. ⁹ Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them" (1 Samuel 8:6-9).

Needless to say, "the ways of the king who shall over them," is far inferior to a nation under God. Samuel will go on to explain the self-serving nature of a massive government (1 Samuel 8:10-18). This brought my thoughts to another unbelieving friend. We sat at his dinner table with his family as he a new president who had just been elected. Speaking to his son, he said, "Don't worry son, he'll take care of us." Truly, haunting words!

Keep in mind, the same author who penned Revelation recorded the words of God's covenant people when Pilate asked if he should crucify their king.

The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15).

The mark of the beast was deeply tattooed in their hearts. All this to say that one of the judgments of those who choose to be ruled by the sinful creature rather than a loving, wise, holy, sacrificial Creator is recorded in Deuteronomy.

So you shall be driven mad because of the sight which your eyes see (Deuteronomy 28:34).

As I have offered many times, though the events recorded in Revelation are largely depicting the fall of Jerusalem and the transition of

the Old to New Covenants, it is not as if there are no lessons for us. The fruit of the rejection of God is a darkened madness. The Apostle Paul taught as much, asserting that the suppression of the knowledge of God produces futile thinking, and foolish, darkened hearts (Romans 1:19-22). Do we not marvel at the folly by which we are surrounded? Mindless, high profile personality figures with massive platforms and monstrous influence are ruling the moment.

I was recently watching a panel of these luminaries, about six of them in a room, discussing if men are men and women are women. The one member of this council who deigned to suggest that men are men and women are women was hesitatingly stomached by the majority and threatened with physical violence by another, professedly tolerant, member of the conversation. This is the current state of our culture, and the only answer is true, biblical, revival, the heart of which is word and sacrament.

The chapter concludes with a description of that community along with their lack of willingness to repent.

But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk. ²¹ And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts (Revelation 9:20-21).

Here are a people who, instead of running to the arms of Christ, choose to shake their fist. We may think we are above the worship of demons, but how many are doing so, even unwittingly. History is littered with people who perhaps intentionally, perhaps unwittingly worship darkness. Consider this Psalm in light of how easily we terminate our babies.

**They served their idols, which became a snare to them. ³⁷
They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons
(Psalm 106:36, 37).**

We self-evaluate as too sophisticated to venerate, revere and even emulate idols “**which can neither see nor hear nor walk.**” Yet we have done just that. John likely borrowed these words from the Psalmist.

**Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. ⁵
They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. ⁶
They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. ⁷
They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and
they do not make a sound in their throat. ⁸ Those who make
them become like them; so do all who trust in them (Psalm
115:4-8).**

We live in a land and at a time when people don't even know how, or why they know the things they know. We have been encouraged not to think that deeply. Isaiah spoke of this:

**The ox knows its owner And the donkey its master's crib; *But*
Israel does not know, My people do not consider (Isaiah 1:3).**

Our current idols are a naturalistic, Darwinian understanding of human nature leading us to the consequential source of comfort, which is a massive beastly government. I could not help thinking of the words of J Sidlow Baxter, when pondering how we become like our idols.

**Those who believe we evolved from the primordial slime
have plotted a destination for themselves, and those who
follow, to re-evolve back into the slime from whence they
believe they came.**

Know that you are "**fearfully and wonderfully made**" (Psalm 139:14). The Fifth chapter of Revelation highlights the God who made us. The sixth chapter heralds the Christ who redeems us. As the bride of Christ, let us close with a meditation upon the words of Isaiah:

**For your Maker *is* your husband, The Lord of hosts *is* His
name; And your Redeemer *is* the Holy One of Israel; He is
called the God of the whole earth (Isaiah 54:5).**

Questions for Study

1. When it comes to God, what are the directions people take when confronted with difficulties? Where do those directions lead (pages 2, 3)?
2. Review Revelation as it leads us to the sixth trumpet. What would Christ have us know (page 3)?
3. What prayers are being answer via the golden altar (pages 3, 4)?
4. An altar represents what types of things (page 4)?
5. Discuss the various views on the Euphrates and the 200 million. What are the merits or weaknesses of each view? What is the lesson regarding the Euphrates that we learn from the Old Testament land promises (pages 5-7)?
6. How do we go about understanding the horses and their riders (page 7)?
7. In what ways did Israel choose a false king? How are we in danger of doing that and what are the consequences (pages 7-9)?
8. Can you give examples of how we can become like the idols we trust? How do we avoid such a thing (pages 9, 10)?