

A Pause in the Mercy of God

A Preview of Things to Come – Part VII

Revelation 15:1-8

Introduction

On Sunday, October 30, 1938, millions of radio listeners were shocked when news alerts announced the invasion of Earth by a species from Mars. The people panicked when they learned of the Martians' ferocious and seemingly unstoppable attack on humanity.

Orson Welles and his cast effectively fooled millions of radio listeners in their adaptation of a novel by H. G. Wells entitled, *War of the Worlds*. The script unfolded by interrupting a musical variety program normally run by the CBS radio network. This was a pre-television time when most people sat in their living rooms to listen to music and a variety of radio programs in the evenings.

The musical program was interrupted with the news that at 8:50 p.m. a huge, flaming object, believed to be a meteorite, fell on a farm in the neighborhood of Grover's Mill, New Jersey, twenty-two miles from Trenton. The radio program then continued, but was again interrupted with a lengthy eyewitness account by a reporter who was on site. The reporter gave a live report as slimy Martians emerged from the huge flying saucer and then began shooting people with their laser guns.

Even though Orson Welles began by telling people his show was an adaptation of H. G. Wells' novel, and even though several times throughout the program he repeated that it was a fictional adaptation of the novel, people only caught bits and pieces and believed it was true without listening to the entire broadcast.

All across the United States, millions of listeners reacted. Many in the New England area loaded up their cars and fled their homes. People improvised gas masks. People were hysterical. They thought the end was near. Scores of people around the country flocked to churches to pray.

When the people learned the truth, millions were infuriated and Orson Welles was actually catapulted to fame.

This idea was not really new.

The British Broadcasting System a few years before Orson Welles' hoax had run a similar hoax giving a play by play of a mass riot that was sweeping through London. The result of this was widespread panic as well.

We would think a hoax like this could not happen again. People are too cynical now, right?

However, about eighteen years ago, radio listeners of KSHE in St. Louis, Missouri, were startled to hear the regular programming interrupted by the jarring signal of the Emergency Broadcast System. The radio disc jockey, John Ulett, came on and said, "Your attention please! This is not a test! The United States is under nuclear attack! I repeat this is not a test!"

Instead of verifying the report through other outlets, or even turning the radio dial to confirm the news, scores of people left work, dropping whatever they were doing, and raced away to be with family members when the bombs arrived to wipe out civilization as they knew it.¹

This idea of announcing imminent danger can be traced all the way back to Aesop who lived five hundred years before the birth of Christ. His compilation of fables includes the story of the boy who cried, "Wolf."

A young shepherd boy was tending the villager's sheep and was rather bored with the whole thing, so he yelled, "Wolf!" He then enjoyed watching the panic in the villagers who raced out to help him. He repeated the hoax several times, even though he was severely scolded. Then, however, a wolf really did come. He yelled for help, but no one came. What the villagers considered a hoax, was this time, in reality, the truth.

For millions of people, the announcement of coming doom is considered just another wild and dramatic adaptation. The church that takes the Bible seriously is considered just another version of CBS radio, "They preach that stuff to get attention; better ratings."

If we take the average person on the street to the book of Revelation to hear the warning of coming world wars, global epidemics, tidal waves, hailstones

the size of golf carts, and water turning into blood, they will think we fell out of the hayloft and landed on our heads. They will either be thinking or maybe even come out and say, “Are you serious? That’s all make-believe. You must really love fiction.”

This is what the people said to Noah.

The trouble is that the human race will one day discover, too late, that God never amuses Himself with panic-stricken people. Every warning is true.

We arrive, in fact, in our study of the future, at the moment when the warning from God comes to an end. Let me invite your attention to Revelation chapter 15 as John continues to preview things to come.

In this chapter, which is the shortest chapter in the book of Revelation, in just eight brief verses, the stage will be set for the final drama in human history.ⁱⁱ

This is not fiction – this warning is real. God never cries wolf.

God’s Warning of Wrath

Look at verse 1 of Revelation chapter 15.

Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels who had seven plagues, which are the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished.

Significant phrases in this verse are:

- . . . *seven plagues, which are the last* . . .
- . . . *the wrath of God is finished.*

The meaning and tense the Greek verb *telew* (τελεω), or “to finish,” means “to be brought to a conclusion, or to complete”.ⁱⁱⁱ

There are those who believe the rapture will occur before these seven bowls of wrath are poured out upon the earth. They reject the view that the church will be raptured prior to the beginning of the Tribulation period, which is called a “pretribulation view”.

Instead, these people hold to what they call a “pre-wrath view” because, among other things, they believe that this scene, previewed in chapter 15, is when the wrath of God really begins to be poured out. So they hold that the rapture will occur prior to this point, allowing the church to be rescued from the wrath to come, as God promised the church in Revelation 3:10.

However, John the apostle does not write in this verse that the wrath of God *begins* with these plagues. Instead, he writes that these plagues are the

last expression of the wrath of God during the Tribulation.

In other words, this is the last of three series of cataclysmic events, including plagues that have carried the wrath of God against fallen mankind.

The first series began to be poured out with the seven seals in chapter 6; the second series involved the seven trumpet judgments in chapters 8-11. The earth has for several years been deluged with horrific disasters, epidemics, and death. In fact, already nearly half the world’s population is dead.

Now, with this final series, we have the image of seven bowls of wrath poured out upon the earth as the wrath of God is brought to a conclusion in the Tribulation and Christ returns to reign on the earth for a thousand years, as we will see later.

With this warning in verse 1 that the wrath of God is about to enter a final chapter of horrifying devastation, the scene suddenly shifts to heaven. There we are shown a scene of incredible rejoicing.

A Vision of Choirs

The choir’s location

Notice verse 2.

And I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God.

We have seen this sea already in chapter 4. Now we see it again with the throne of God set upon it and surrounded by what John says looks like a sea of glass.

Imagine this transparent crystal shimmering and reflecting the glory of God’s brilliant throne. Moses also had a vision of this when he and the leaders of Israel saw under the feet of God what appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself (Exodus 24:10). Ezekiel described this as “something like an expanse, like the awesome gleam of crystal” (Ezekiel 1:22).^{iv}

This expanse of glass, as it were, is like a tranquil sea – not a small pond, by the way, but a sea – reflecting the throne of God, shining with all the reflected glory and light of God Himself.^v

There before Him, standing on this sea of glass, are martyrs who have been faithful to Christ, having died at the hands of the antichrist before whom they would not bow.

In verse 2, John adds a visual description to this sea of glass that did not appear in chapter 4. He writes at the beginning of the verse,

And I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire . . .

Fire is often associated in the Bible with God's judgment. Hebrews 10:27 refers to the,

. . . terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.

In Hebrews 12:29, we are told that,

. . . our God is a consuming fire.

The impending judgment of God is swirling around the platform of clear glass – mixing red, fiery color to the crystal sea upon which His throne stands. It becomes a terrifying description of His anger and judgment which will pour down in one final devastating series of events.

The reason these saints are singing instead of fainting is because of their relationship with God through Christ. They have no reason to fear – they are safe in His justifying grace on their behalf.

Some time ago, I had to go to the courthouse in downtown Raleigh to see someone regarding my excessive haste and focus for the sake of the ministry. I knew one of the judges who normally held court downtown as a federal judge. After I had given my investment to the great state of North Carolina, I stopped by his courtroom. I had told him I was coming by and he asked me to stop by and say hello.

I stepped inside at the back of the courtroom and the judge was sitting in his black robe behind the desk of the paneled courtroom. The bailiff was standing nearby, armed to the teeth. Court was actually in session and people were everywhere.

I did not want to disturb anything, but the judge spotted me and motioned for me to come forward. I said, "Me?" "Yes sir, approach." I walked down the aisle and through the swinging door past four guys in orange jumpsuits sitting with their feet shackled together. I looked at them and they looked at me. Saying, "How ya doing?" did not seem to fit, so I kept walking.

I made it to the bench and the judge stuck his hand over the desk, shook my hand, and said, "Hey, Pastor." Talk about feeling special. He then announced, "Court in recess," hopped up, and told me to follow him back to his chambers. I did. You do not argue with a judge in his own courtroom! We chatted for a while, prayed, and he went back out and resumed court.

I will bet the judge never shook the hands of the four guys sitting there. I do not think they were ever invited into his chambers. I am guessing, but there was probably never any fellowship between them. To the four men, he was a judge. To me, he was a judge, but also my friend because of our common faith in Christ.

Although we have a picture of judgment swirling red like fire around the bench of the Superior Judge of the universe, these saints are filled with joy because they are His friends, through Christ.

John describes these believers, in verse 2, as,

. . . those who had been victorious over the beast [the antichrist] and his image and the number of his name . . .

This is the mark of the beast which these people would not allow to be put upon their right hand or their forehead; the number which represented the sum of the antichrist's name, totaling six hundred sixty six, even though refusal meant death! However, John refers to them with heavenly perspective – the martyrs were the "victorious" ones; the winners.

Every time the antichrist's guillotine fell, he said, in effect, "I have won another victory."

In the world's eyes, these believers were considered the losers. They were captured, imprisoned, reviled, and hated. And they were put to death. Why? Because they confessed Jesus Christ as Lord alone.

Against the antichrist, these people had seemed powerless, helpless, stripped of everything and even of life itself. Yet upon their arrival in heaven, they are crowned as the victorious ones.^{vi}

God turns defeat upside down.

Do you see the perspective of heaven in this?

The antichrist is under the delusion that he is demonstrating absolute power and ridding himself of his enemies. In reality, all he is doing is running a shuttle service to heaven.

The antichrist thinks he is worthy of worship, but from the perspective of heaven, one author wrote, he is nothing more than an elevator boy – delivering saints up to glory.^{vii}

I love this.

On Earth, the antichrist seems to be winning. In the presence of God, the victory celebration has already begun.

The choir's lyrics

Verse 3a gives us the titles to this choir's two hymns of praise.

And they sang the song of Moses, the bondservant of God, and the song of the Lamb . . .

More than likely, this song of Moses is from Exodus 15 when the children of Israel celebrated in song at the Red Sea after escaping with their lives from Pharaoh. This was the song of their exodus from slavery toward the Promised Land.

This song from Exodus 15:1-19 was stamped upon the memory of every Jew. It was sung at every Sabbath evening service in the synagogue. To this day, at every orthodox Jewish service, one of two prayers they will pray refers to this song of Moses.^{viii}

We have already been introduced to the song of the Lamb, and in Revelation chapter 15, we have another stanza or two added to the great anthem of those redeemed from slavery to sin and brought into the Promised Land.

| The song of Moses was: | The song of the Lamb was: |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| sung at the Red Sea | sung at the crystal sea |
| triumph over Egypt | triumph over Satan |
| about God bringing His people out | about God bringing His people in |
| one of the first hymns in scripture. | one of the last hymns in scripture. ^{ix} |

The wonderful British expositor John Phillips wrote that the lyrics of these great hymns begin with, in verses 3b-4:

- How great Thou art.
Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty . . .
- How good Thou art.
. . . righteous and true are Your ways, King of the nations!
- How glorious Thou art.
Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? . . .^x

Listen to them sing. There is not one word of their suffering. It is now seen with the perspective of heaven.

There is not one word of complaint. They now stand before the throne of their great, good, and glorious Savior.

Mark the fact that there is not even one word about themselves. Every pronoun has to do with God.

- Great and marvelous are *Your* works . . .
- Righteous and true are *Your* ways . . .
- Who will not fear and glorify *Your* name?

This choral outburst is focused upon and flooded with the exaltation of God.

One author wrote, generations ago, "In the perfect presence of God, self is wholly forgotten. Heaven is a place where we finally forget about ourselves and remember only God."^{xi}

Now why does this choir of redeemed Tribulation saints sing? They sing because:

- Verse 4b,
. . . You alone are holy . . .
- Verse 4c,
. . . all the nations will come and worship before You . . .
- Verse 4d,
. . . Your righteous acts have been revealed.

By the way, this is not referring to some sort of mass conversion of all the nations. This is further textual evidence that during the millennial kingdom, now just a few months away, people from every tongue, tribe, and nation will have believed in Christ alone for salvation – survived the Tribulation – and will now enter the Millennial Kingdom to worship and serve King Jesus.^{xii}

Isaiah 2, Micah 4, and Zechariah 14 all refer to the nations that will come to worship the reigning sovereign Lord.

That which John sees next is really amazing.

A Vision of Angels

Notice verse 5.

After these things I looked, and the temple of the tabernacle of testimony in heaven was opened,

The word "temple" is *naos*, which is a reference to the holy of holies, or the place in which the golden ark of the covenant housed the two tablets of the law written by the finger of God.

The angel's apparel

In this vision, the holy of holies is opened.
Notice verse 6.

and the seven angels who had the seven plagues came out of the temple, clothed in linen, clean and bright, and girded around their chests with golden sashes.

These angels look the way Christ did in chapter 1. Why? They represent Him in this act of judgment. Remember, Jesus Christ is either the Great Redeemer or He will one day become the Grim Reaper.

. . . the Father . . . has given all judgment to the Son . . . (John 5:22)

Notice these angels are dressed in linen robes – this was the dress of the high priests. Thus, the angels present the image that they are, at this point, the representatives of God.

The angels are emerging from the holy of holies, representing the very place where the law of God has been kept. They are given a mission to bring terror and judgment to Earth because the law has been broken and mankind has disregarded the law of God and God long ago promised,

. . . He would by no means leave the guilty unpunished . . . (Exodus 34:7)

If what the martyred saints sang of God is true – that He is holy and just – then sin must be punished.

If God does not judge sinners, He is unjust. If God sweeps sin under the carpet of some distant galaxy, then He is not holy. He is, in fact, what we would call a crooked judge who winks at sin.

The prophet Habakkuk asks in chapter 1 (paraphrased),

Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right?

David answers in Psalm 19:9b,

. . . the judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether.

The angel's assignment

The angels have been given the authority of Christ to receive their goblets of divine retribution. With some ceremony, this will be amazing to behold. And every one of us who believe by faith in Christ alone will be watching this scene in Revelation 15 unfold. These seven angels will file out of the holy of holies and approach the throne of God where we are told in verse 7,

Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God, who lives forever and ever.

Chapter 16 will begin to reveal the contents of these bowls. It will be absolutely horrifying.

The apostle Paul has already taught us that the wrath of God is being stored up – literally stockpiling, sin upon sin.

God could judge man immediately, but, as Paul has already written in Romans 2:4, God is forbearing. The word “forbearance” means, “to hold back; to delay”.

One of the gifts of grace toward unbelieving mankind is that God does not strike him dead at the first word of blasphemy. God allows him to live and offers him pardon, which he persists in refusing.

Robert Ingersoll was a lawyer, a brilliant orator, and an agnostic who lived during the mid-1800s. His father had been a Presbyterian pastor for years and, at one point, served as an associate of Charles Finney the evangelist, even preaching for him when Finney was away.

Robert defied any accountability to God. In fact, A. B. Simpson, the founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, called Ingersoll, “this daring blasphemer”.

At the height of his fame, people would pay one dollar per ticket just to hear Ingersoll speak. This was an enormous sum of money in the 1800s to spend on a ticket.

Often, when he spoke against the existence of a personal God, Ingersoll would stand on the stage before hundreds and even thousands of people and take out his pocket watch and say, “If there really is a God, let Him strike me dead in thirty seconds.”

Then, he would hold up the watch and count down the seconds. People would gasp and some would even faint. They might wonder if there was a God privately, or speak to close friends about their doubts, but they would not publicly challenge Him to prove His existence.

“. . . 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1,” Ingersoll would say, “there is no God.”

If I were God, at the last second of this countdown, Ingersoll would hear a clap of thunder and he would disappear, except for his pocket watch, which would fall to the stage. Then, in a booming voice from above, I would say, “Anybody else?”

Today, Bob Ingersolls walk the streets of this world by the millions. They teach in our classrooms;

they live in our neighborhoods; they work at our job locations. “There is no God, like the Bible says. We can live our lives the way we want. We can sin; we can blaspheme, adulterate, fornicate, manipulate, and pontificate! There is no God!”

And where is God? Seated upon a sea of glass, taking notes. Every word, thought, and deed is recorded (Revelation 20:13).

God will eventually summon His angels and say, “Now, there’s no holding back; no more delay.”

Those who have rejected the gospel of God will be judged by the law of God, and with the law of God there is no mercy. In fact, notice verse 8.

And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power; and no one was able to enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

This is a picture to represent the fact that, “This means no one can stop the hand of God. Once the time of final judgment has come, the time for intercession is past. Christ is no longer knocking on the door; He is entering to act in sovereign judgment.”^{xiii}

This is a picture of the fact that no one can change their mind and somehow apply blood to the lid of the mercy seat inside the holy of holies. There is no one to intercede. There will be no more mercy, no more delays, and no more opportunities to repent until the seven plagues have passed.^{xiv}

The world would say, “Oh, right. You’re into that scare tactic again. It sounds like the *War of the Worlds*.”

It does. And it will be. Armageddon and a world at war is just around the corner.

This is no hoax; this is not some religious drama with special effects to scare people into a panic and into the church. This is the truth.

God does not cry wolf.

However, in His patience, God warns. And by His grace, He invites.

How long would you continue to invite someone to your home before giving up? A week? A month? A year?

Noah warned and invited people to get a free ticket aboard the ark for one hundred twenty years. Christ has invited every generation to join His church for 2,000 years.

How long has Christ been inviting you? Isn’t it about time you took His warning seriously and accepted His invitation personally?

. . . Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Romans 10:13)

Saved! Saved from many things – including the coming wrath of God.

ⁱ Ray Stedman, Revelation: God’s Final Word (Discovery House, 1991), p. 271; “Disk Jockey Falsely Reports Nuclear Attack,” Associated Press, (Jan. 31, 1991).

ⁱⁱ Edward Hindson, Twenty-first Century Biblical Commentary Series: Revelation (AMG, 2002), p. 161.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 847.

^{iv} John MacArthur, Revelation: Volume 2 (Moody, 2000), p. 124.

^v Stewart Custer, Revelation: From Patmos to Paradise (BJU Press, 2004), p. 168.

^{vi} Stedman, p. 273.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} William Barclay, The Revelation of John: Volume 2 (Westminster Press, 1976), p. 119.

^{ix} John Phillips, Exploring Revelation (Loizeaux Brothers, 1991), p. 187.

^x Ibid., p. 187.

^{xi} Barclay, p. 120.

^{xii} Mark W. Wilson, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Revelation (Zondervan, 2002), p. 95.

^{xiii} Hindson, p. 164.

^{xiv} Daymond R. Duck and Larry Richards, The Book of Revelation (Thomas Nelson, 2006), p. 226.