

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE SCROLL AND THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Is the world coming to an end . . . really soon? That question has become very commonplace over the last year. We ask this question anxiously as Christians who believe the truth of the Apostle's Creed that Christ will indeed "come to judge the living and the dead." Henry Bullinger, the Swiss Reformer, preached an extended series of sermons on the Apostle's Creed and declared: "The seventh article of our faith is this: *From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.* In the former articles there is set forth and confessed the divine goodness, bountifulness, and grace in Christ: now also shall be declared the divine justice, severity, and vengeance that is in him. For there are two comings of our Lord Jesus Christ. First he came basely in the flesh, to be the Redeemer and Saviour of the world: at the second time he shall come gloriously to judgment, to be a judge and revenger that will not be entreated against all unrepentant sinners and wicked doers. And he shall come out of heaven, from the right hand of the Father, in his visible and very human body, to be seen of all flesh, with the incomprehensible power of his Godhead, and being attended on by all the angels. For the Lord himself in the gospel saith: *They shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with great power and glory, and he shall send his angels with the great sound of a trump.*"¹ "Over fifteen hundred years ago St. Augustine asserted that time does not exist on its own, as if it were an object. Time exists in the minds of the timekeepers. Time is a way by which we interpret the world and what is happening in it. When historians describe the past, they tell us about it not as it was but as they view it now. This same principle applies to our understanding of the future. All prophecies are about time that has never been."² The enigma of time . . . what is it? We mark time chronologically but we also mark time by events, not only world-changing events (e.g., WWI and II), but also by personal events (e.g., marriage, births, and deaths). "There is never enough time for human plans in western culture. We are usually hurrying to meet some *deadline*. The line at which all physical life ends is death. All living organisms are dying from the moment of conception, and the rapids or the calm estuaries of the temporal river carry us ever closer to our *deadline*. Each of us enters this world with a terminal illness, and in a very real sense time is a killer, nudging us always closer to the brink of death. The inroads of time are written on our faces and hairlines. For the human ego time can be a curse! We use everything from cosmetics to exercise to forestall or erase the furrows of time in our bodies. But there is never enough time. We try to *make* more time by becoming more efficient in our use of time through technology. We engineer time-saving devices, like computers, to improve the quality of our lives, and then spend our time poring over them. Modern medicine attempts to give us more time by delaying or diverting the diseases that afflict our physical bodies in their journey through time, but our terminal illness ultimately has its terminus. The businessman bound for a deadline pleads for just a little more time. The student completing an examination asks the teacher for more time. The contractor needs more time to finish the construction project. Busy people chasing career goals wish for more time with their children. But time eludes them all. In the end there is never enough time, and time runs out for everyone. We cannot live without time, but ultimately time slays us. It is a love/hate relationship. We cannot live without time, but time is a curse!"³

In Isaac Watts' well-known hymn, *Our God, Our Help In Ages Past*, we sing of time and of things eternal:

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.

Under the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure.

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God,
To endless years the same.

A thousand ages in Thy sight
Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guard while life shall last,
And our eternal home.

There are different Greek words used to translate *time* in the New Testament, *kairos*, *aiōn*, and *chronos*. *Kairos* refers to some specific window of time or opportune time. It is used in Ephesians 5:15-16 and Colossians 4:5 where time is something of value and should be redeemed. *Aiōn* refers to time in terms of its extent and is often used in reference to the eternal. The phrase *ho aiōn tōn aiōnōn* is translated "the age of the ages." *Chronos* (from which we get words like "chronology" and "chronometer") refers to seconds, minutes, hours, years – things that are measurable. In Revelation 10:6 we encounter the phrase *chronos ouketi estai*, which the KJV translates "and time shall be no more." This is misleading and appears to imply that time as such ceases to be. "This is not," writes Beale, "to be understood in a technical, philosophical sense that at the end of history there will be an abolition of time, which is to be replaced by timelessness. Such a doctrine may be deducible on the basis of other biblical and apocalyptic texts concerning the nontemporal aspect of the eternal state (e.g., 2 En. 33:2; 65:7), but Rev. 10:6 yields no information concerning this philosophical question. The idea here is that there is a predetermined time in the future when God's *purposes* for history will be completed. The expression could be translated *there will be delay* (*chronizō* has the meaning of delay in Hab. 2:3, where the fulfillment of the prophetic vision *will not delay* when the appointed time arrives for its execution; so likewise Matt. 25:5; 24:48; Heb. 10:37). The point is that *when God has decided to complete his purposes and to terminate history, there will be no delay in its termination.*"⁴ In other words, this points to the reality that God's delay of judgment has reached its end.

- I. ***THE BREAKING OF THE SEALS.*** "The breaking of the seals in Revelation 6-8 continues the vision of heaven that is described in chapters 4 and 5, but with a change along the lines that I mentioned in an earlier study in this series. This change concerns the flow of Revelation, which takes the form of a constant shifting between a scene in heaven and what

is happening on earth. Chapters 4 and 5 were set in the throne room of heaven. Now we look to earth to see what is happening here, and what we see are the calamities of world history being released by the One who alone is worthy to break the scroll's seals. As Jesus breaks the seals, the events that they portend unfold, as symbolized in the case of the first four seals by four variously colored horses and their riders, who go out from God's presence in order to bring suffering to the earth. They are the famous *four horsemen of the apocalypse*. There is an echo here of two visions that are described by Zechariah. One is of a rider on a red horse, behind whom are red, brown, and white horses (see Zech. 1:8-11). These riders are sent out to survey the earth, and they return in time to report that the whole earth is at rest and in peace (see v. 11). The second vision is in Zechariah 6:1-8. It is of four chariots that are pulled in turn by four red, black, white, and dappled horses. These chariots are described as the spirits of heaven going to the ends of the earth, though Zechariah does not say what they are doing. John would have been aware of these visions and may have even been thinking of them, but the scene that he describes is quite different. In Revelation 6, the world is not at peace – it is at war. And what is most significant, God is not sending his messengers into the world to discover whether the world is at peace or at war but in order to *bring* war and its terrible aftermath to those who have not heeded his call to repentance – and who must now experience his just judgments. It is Jesus who breaks the seals and thus brings judgment. In case we miss the significance of this, even the call that summons the four riders to *Come!* is spoken by the four living creatures who surround the throne of the Almighty and who speak for God. *Come!* is the Greek imperative *erchou*. It can mean either *come* or *go*. Here it means *Be going!* or *Come out and get going!*⁵

II. ***THE JUDGMENTS OF GOD.*** Mark Dever noted that: “As humans, we do have an instinctive sense of justice. When someone is able to evade responsibility for his actions, we say, *He could get away with murder*. Even if a few academics do not, most of us prefer stories where the bad guys get their comeuppance and the good guys are rewarded. Criminals being brought to justice is an ever-popular political slogan. Yet when people read about this swirling series of judgments, each culminating in a tremendous storm, they are troubled. And that makes sense. Our justice, as we experience it, is insufficient. The judgments handed down by judges do nothing for the victims. Our justice is uncertain. People go to jail and are made worse. Our justice is often stopgap. We cannot catch those who are guilty; and when we do, they get out and repeat their crimes. And our justice can be mistaken. Innocent people are sentenced and suffer wrongly. In this world, there is no perfect justice. At the root of it all, though, our hesitancy about justice and the punishment of wrong must be related to an awareness of our own vulnerability to just accusation. Did not Jesus himself suggest that, at least sometimes, we are not competent to judge: *If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone* (John 8:7). And if what Jesus says is true, all of us know, deep in our hearts, that none of us would cast any stones. But the one who spoke these words was the one without sin. And as the one who is just, he is the one who will mete out justice. He is the Lamb who opens the scrolls. In the book of Revelation, the instinctive sense of justice shared by every human finally meets with the one judge who shares none of our judicial inadequacies, who knows all the facts right down to the motives of the heart, who knows right from wrong precisely, and who is able to execute his judgments perfectly. This is the judge against whom no appeal could ever be raised.”⁶

A. ***The Nature of God's Judgments: The Old Testament Background.*** Leon Morris has observed that, “The Old Testament writers insist that the Lord is active in judging. Over and over they use the various judgment words to describe His activity past, present and future.”⁷ Here are some of the Hebrew terms:

Charah – used 92 times and commonly of God. It means “to become heated up, to burn with fury.”

Chârôn – used 41 times. It refers exclusively to divine anger and means “a burning, fierce wrath.” (e.g., Ex. 32:12)

Oâtsaph – used 34 times, and 18 of those refer to God. It means “to be bitter.”

Chêmâh – used mostly of God. It refers to a venom or a poison, and is frequently associated with jealousy. (e.g., Nah. 1:2)

Za’am – used in Psalm 7:11, “God is a righteous Judge and a God who feels indignation every day. The word suggests a steady resolve with no tendency to subside into compromise or indifference in His holy anger.

- B. ***The Certainty, Finality and Horror of God’s Judgment.*** God is a righteous judge and His judgment a present reality. Morris writes: “It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this – judgment.” (Heb. ix. 27; there is nothing in the Greek to correspond to the *cometh* of RV). Judgment is as inescapable as death. Indeed, it is more so, for the New Testament envisages that some will still be alive at the second coming, and thus will not see death, but it does not envisage any as escaping judgment. For some there is *a certain fearful expectation of judgment* (Heb. x. 27), but fearful or not men may not escape it. Paul asks a rhetorical question, *reckonest thou this, O man . . . that thou shalt escape the judgment of God* (Rom. ii. 3; cf. Mt. xxiii. 33). And the answer is never in doubt.”⁸

CONCLUSION: Terry Johnson has recently written: “If we are honest, most of us would admit that at one time or another we have been tempted to refashion the biblical picture of God. We are ashamed to tell people about hell, and frankly we do not see how an eternity in flames could be fair. When someone says, *What did I do to deserve that? I’ve never hurt anyone*, we are dumbfounded and do not know what to say. We are ashamed to speak of repentance and a holy God’s wrath against sin because we are afraid to *turn people off*. We do not want to be negative and we do not want people to think poorly of us, so it is easier to talk about love and about gaining peace of mind, joy, and fulfilment. Yet in doing so, we attract them to a God different from the God of the Bible. When we do so, the apostle Paul is against us, for when he preaches the gospel, he begins by saying *The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth* (Rom. 1:18). Never do the biblical writers allow God’s love, itself a vital theme, to cancel out his holiness. Beware: when God is rejected, he is not rejected because of his power, wisdom, love, and grace. He is rejected because of his holiness. Humanity’s *righteousness* suppresses the truth (Rom. 1:18). It is God’s holiness with which we cannot live. *They would own him in his power, says Stephen Charnock, when they stood in need of deliverance; they would own him in his mercy, when they were plunged in distress; but they would not imitate him in holiness.* Humanity has not given up religion; the human race is very religious. Rather, it is the holy God of the Bible who is rejected and replaced. At the heart of false religion, *Christian* and otherwise, is a denial of God’s holiness. False religions may say much that is true, but God’s holiness is lost. *To own all the rest, Charnock continues, and deny him this, is to frame him as an unbeautiful monster – a deformed power. Indeed all sin is against this attribute; all sin aims in general at the being of God, but in particular at the holiness of his being.* The apostle Paul describes the process in Romans 1 when he says of the human race in general: *Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal [for incorruptible KJV, NASB] God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things . . . they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.* (Rom. 1:22-23, 25).”⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Decades of Henry Bullinger* I (rpt. Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), p. 152.

² Reginald Stackhouse, *The End of The World? A New Look at an Old Belief* (Paulist Press, 1997), p. 28. The difficulty in understanding the nature of Time has been well-stated by Augustine: “Si nemo a me quaerat, scio, si quaerenti explicari velim, nescio” (I know what it is if no one asks me, but if I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know how), as cited by J. W. Montgomery, *The Shape of The Past* (Bethany Fellowship, 1975), p. 20.

³ L. R. Rohr, *Trinity, Time and Eternity* (Confessor Press, 1997), p. 148.

⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1999), p. 534.

⁵ J. M. Boice, *Seven Churches, Four Horsemen, One Lord* (P&R, 2020), p. 200.

⁶ Mark Dever, *The Message of The New Testament* (Crossway, 2005), p. 535.

⁷ L. Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (Eerdmans, 1960), p. 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁹ T. L. Johnson, *The Identity and Attributes of God* (Banner of Truth, 2019), p. 146.