



Part 39 – The Return of the King

Revelation 19:11-21

In Christian history, this passage has almost universally been taken as an account of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The Lord is depicted as returning in his regal glory, no longer a lowly servant but the reigning King. The dragon and the beast are cast into the lake of fire along with all those who followed them. The portrait is one of great sobriety. The event of Christ's return inevitably determines one's understanding of the meaning of history. It places us in the history of redemption and is the promise that the Lamb will triumph and complete his great saving work. Christ's return is the event which guarantees that, for God's people, history is not tragedy but triumph.

It is a very important fact to notice that the accounts of the Second Coming that we are given in Holy Scripture are characteristically more solemn and less celebratory than we might have expected. After all, the Second Coming will be the day of triumph for believers, the day on which every form of sorrow will be obliterated and every form of happiness be experienced to an immeasurable degree. However, whether in Jesus' own teaching about his return, or that of the Apostle Paul (2 Thessalonians 1), or here in Revelation 19, the note of sober warning is accented more than the note of celebration. The effect is to appeal to the church, that we might be solemn and dedicated concerning our lives and witness in this present day.

The King will return.

Vs. 11 – In John's vision, heaven opens and the glorified Christ appears. In his vision, John has been in heaven from the beginning of the chapter and now there appears a magnificent figure upon a white horse. This is a scene depicted in a variety of ways elsewhere in the Bible but always with the same purpose: to represent the final appearance of the Lord in history to execute judgment on the earth.

“Now in the opened heaven John sees the victorious champion of the church; Jesus the Son of Man, the faithful and true Witness, the Word of God, the messianic King, the Lamb, the Lord of Lords and King of kings. Jesus' appearance, names, and companions call believers to rest our hope confidently and completely in his almighty power to vindicate his saints and eradicate his enemies.”¹

The King will be known.

You won't understand the Lord's justice if you don't understand the Lord's character.

Vs. 11 – The white horse is symbolic for the Lord's authority and power. John's first readers would have recognized the significance of the white horse as it was always associated with military victory: “In righteousness he judges and makes war” – The God who reveals himself in his Word is often far from the sentimental deity preferred by many in the west.

Vs. 12 – The Lord's fiery eyes indicate his penetrating sight. There is not a single person or act of which he is not fully knowledgeable. His “many diadems,” or crowns are symbolic of the fact that his rule is comprehensive and universal. There is not a single realm in all creation over which the Lord does not reign. That he has a name “that no one knows but himself” indicates that, however much he has revealed himself to us, our knowledge of him is only ever partial. Our minds cannot fully encompass him.

Vs. 13 – The blood which stains Christ's robe is the blood of his enemies. It is a gruesome image for sure, but one necessary to communicate the fullness of his victory over the wicked (vs. 15).

Vs. 14 – Furthering the warfare imagery, the returning Christ is portrayed as being accompanied by an army on white horses. The white horses were ceremonial, ridden upon in public Triumphs by conquering generals. So, in effect, the war is over. The enemies of God have been routed without so much as a battle.

Vs. 15 – Here we read more symbolism as a sword is depicted coming from the Lord's mouth. This points to the power of his word, in this case, the word of his judgment “with which to strike down the nations.” The sword is symbolic of the Lord's authority over life and death.² That he will rule over the wicked nations “with a rod of iron,” is taken from the great Messianic Psalm 2:9 which tells us that the Son will “break [the nations] with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel”.

¹ Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001) p. 270

² Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) p. 684

“Despite the preferences of naïve wishful thinkers, at the cosmic level there can be no true mercy, no genuine redemption, apart from justice.”³

Vs. 16 – This clause could be translated, “On his robe in the place of his thigh.” Either way, this seems to suggest that this particular name is written in the place of his sword. The name in that place proclaims that there is no authority on earth that matches his own. The Lord is the King above all kings. We sing, “Lord Sabaoth his name” which means “Lord of hosts” or “Lord of armies.” There will be no mistaking Jesus when he returns. As a baby born in Bethlehem clothed, as it were, in human frailty, he was easy to overlook. But when he returns, Christ will be universally acknowledged as the righteous Judge, the King of kings, the eternal and living Word of God.

The King will judge justly.

Vv. 17-18 – Notice how the final judgment is described as “the great supper of God” (vs. 17). This is a sharp contrast to the great marriage supper of the Lamb (vs. 9). Here we see the unclean carrion birds gather to consume those, “great and small,” who made a mockery of God’s grace and refused the invitation to the Lamb’s banquet. Notice the contrast to the “great and small” who are the servants of the Lord (vs. 5). This gruesome picture of judgment is the necessary prelude to God making all things right. Without the destruction of the wicked, there is no new creation. Without God’s judgment over sin and evil and all that is fallen in our world, there can be no end to violence and injustice and cancer and abuse and despair.

Vv. 19-21 – There is no description of a final battle just as there was none in chapter 17. The dragon, the beast, and the false prophet are cast by the Lamb into the lake of fire (Hell) without presenting the least threat to His victory. In a sense then, there is no battle *per se*. Only a fatal final stand by the wicked against the One whose eyes are like fire and whose word is a double-edged sword.

Here in chapter 19, we see salvation portrayed both as banquet and warfare, redemption and destruction. Salvation involves both the intimacies and celebrations of marriage as well as the blood of battle. It is the loving embrace of God for his people and the final all-out assault on evil. In a moral universe governed by a good God, salvation must consist of both realities. “It is a holy God who must eradicate sin in order to inaugurate the perfect reality for which he had created mankind.”⁴

The Lord has given these words to encourage his persecuted people.

These terrifying visions of God’s wrath are intended to sustain and encourage the persecuted church. When they are victimized for the sake of Christ, Christians must not despair. The righteous King is returning! As Jesus taught us, we have no need to seek vengeance since God himself will have his holy vengeance (Romans 12:19). For those Christians who live in relative freedom and comfort, such depictions of the Lord’s wrath are often jarring and perhaps even offensive. But to the multitudes of Christians who have been persecuted, imprisoned, and martyred, the promise of God’s coming judgment is a word of hope.

“Soon you will discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God’s refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die.”⁵

The Lord has given these words so that his church might properly understand her role in the world prior to his return.

The imagery of defeat in battle, of corpses being consumed by birds of prey, and of the lake of fire are meant to revolt and frighten us. These words are meant to arrest us for the sake of our loved ones and neighbors who live in denial of the grace of God in Christ. These words are meant to galvanize our witness as well as our obedience. But, be prepared: A proper seriousness about life concerning the coming judgment will not be appreciated by unbelievers. No one wants to be told that they are facing the wrath of God unless they repent and turn to Christ. And while that may not be the very *first* conversation we have with an unbeliever, at some point our witness must at least resemble that of Jesus and the prophets and the apostles: that sinners must repent or face the Lord’s righteous judgment. And that reality ought to call the church to attention to follow the Lord into the breach for the sake of souls.

³ Dennis Johnson, p. 271

⁴ Grant R. Osborne, p. 694

⁵ Miroslav Volf, quoted in Dennis Johnson, p. 271