

The End of It All

BY BRETT YOUNGER

The rider on the white horse and the party in heaven in Revelation 19 seem far away most days, but what we believe about the future affects how we live. Believing that the end belongs to God breaks the power of the world and fills us with hope that continues even in sorrow.

Revelation 19

I have a good friend who works hard to keep me informed by sending op-ed pieces from *The New York Times*, articles from *Christian Century*, and Texas Aggie jokes. Every now and then he emails, for reasons only he understands, an update from the *Rapture Index*. The purpose of this Web site is to “eliminate the wide variance that currently exists with prophecy reporting” into a “cohesive indicator.” The *Rapture Index* is a “Dow Jones of end times, a prophetic speedometer. The higher the number the faster we’re moving towards the rapture.”

These people with too much time on their hands list forty-five categories in which they assign a score of one to five. Indicators of the end of the world include the occult, Satanism, false prophets, the mark of the beast, the Antichrist, earthquakes, floods, plagues, unemployment, inflation, interest rates, globalism, ecumenism, liberalism, and civil rights. Civil rights? The scale for the total score ranges from below 85 (“slow prophetic activity”) to above 145 (“fasten your seat belt”). The index as of the last time I checked was 164.¹ Try to stay calm.

The goofiness that surrounds the Second Coming is embarrassing. The clearest thing Jesus ever said was, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matthew 25:13; cf. Mark 13:32 and Matthew 24:36). Fortunetellers have been guessing the day and hour ever since.

In the year 1000 A.D., a flurry of predictions led many Christians to sell their homes. In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther said the Pope was the

Antichrist and so he expected Jesus soon. Christopher Columbus thought his explorations would lead to the final crusade. William Miller predicted the Second Coming would take place in 1843. His followers, the Seventh Day Adventists, have adjusted their schedule. Charles Taze Russell, the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, predicted the apocalypse would be in 1914. They also have postponed the end of the world.

Before we pitch the Second Coming entirely, we need to remember that while many of the answers we have come up with are foolish, the questions that started it all are not: "Will evil continue to win?" "At the end of it all, will God be there?"

The best selling religious book of the 1970s was Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). The author predicted that Jesus would return in the next few years. He spent profits from the book on a mansion that took three years to build. When I was in junior high, an evangelist came to our church and said that Jesus would be back in less than five years. Every thirteen-year-old boy in our

church had the same thought: "I will never get to have sex." As the year 2000 approached, people began finding references to Y2K in the Book of Revelation. The Mayans have their money on 2012 for the end of the world.

The silliness surrounding the Second Coming seems as outdated as hand-written letters and real country music. Good church members are tempted to ignore the Second Coming altogether.

At first glance, Revelation 19 does not seem helpful in getting past the crazy stuff. This chapter will never replace Psalm 23 or the Parable of the Good Samaritan as believers' favorite biblical text. There are good reasons it does not show up in children's Sunday school literature. Some of it sounds like a comic book you would not want your twelve-year-old reading. John writes about a white horse whose rider has eyes of fire and clothes dipped in blood. He rides with a sharp sword in his mouth, leading an army on white horses to battle. My grandmother would not care for this at all: he has a tattoo on his thigh (Revelation 19:11-16). An angel calls for the birds to get ready to eat the flesh of the enemy (19:17-18). It is blood vengeance and eternal fire. No one in the Woman's Missionary Union ever crocheted, "Eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses – Revelation 19:18."

Even the less shocking parts of this text can be hard to take. "Hallelujah" can be awkward. We are suspicious of people who say "Hallelujah" too much. They are often the same people who have "In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned" bumper stickers.

Before we pitch the Second Coming entirely, we need to remember that while many of the answers we have come up with are foolish, the questions that started it all are not: "When history finishes, what will be left?" "Will evil continue to win?" "At the end of it all, will God be there?"

The early Christians believed that the end of the world was just around the corner. They had urgent reasons to long for Christ's return. John writes the Book of Revelation during a time of great persecution to assure frightened Christians that God will win.

If you were describing the end, what kind of language would you use? Would you use scientific language? Would you talk about the gases in the sun burning up, burning out, and taking our solar system with it?

Would you use theological language? Eschatologically speaking, the Parousia, or Second Coming, will be the end of history. Time will be no more as the finite gives way to the infinite.

Or would you use the kind of apocalyptic language John used? Would you work not at the most logical level of our ideas, but at the level of imagination? This is the language of white horses leading a victory charge, music overwhelming sorrow, and a party that will never end.

One day God's people will join the choir singing the "Hallelujah Chorus." George Handel probably made the right decision when he judiciously decided not to have us sing about "the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication" (19:2), but John insists God's judgment is something to sing about. We are usually more comfortable with God's mercy and kindness, but we should also give thanks for the destruction of evil.

Babylon's smoke will rise forever. Some of the things the world loves most fondly are the objects of God most intense wrath.² The culture thinks it has taken the place of God, but it is wrong. The vast commercial and political empires will fall. Domitian, the Caesar who ruled at the time Revelation was written, conferred on himself the title "Our Lord and God," but God and not Caesar will have the final word.³

The day is coming when God will make right all the world's wrongs. God's justice will roll down like Niagara Falls and sound like sharp cracks of thunder. God's salvation should awaken gratitude. God's glory should awaken reverence. God's power should awaken trust.⁴

The twenty-four elders, representing the Church, and the four living creatures, the heavenly beings, will fall on their knees in adoration.⁵ The word "Hallelujah," which means "Praise the Lord" appears only here in the New Testament, but it is in this chapter four times (19:1, 3, 4 and 6). Hallelujah! Amen! Thank you! Praise the Lord!

Christ who created wine at the wedding in Cana will throw the mother of all wedding celebrations. When the Bible pictures the relationship of Christ and the Church as that of a husband and wife, it is expressing the truth that there is a covenant between them and an everlasting union.⁶ The

prophets depict Israel as God's bride. Jesus compares himself to a bridegroom at a wedding. The picture is of love, joy, and fidelity.⁷

The Book of Revelation is too often left behind by Christians. The story reflects the theology of Christians who lived under persecution, so it may be hard for those who enjoy religious freedom and material prosperity to understand. The call for most of us is to follow Jesus while living in a seductive culture. For "many modern readers, our retirement plans, mortgages, investments, credit cards, and entertainment centers alienate us from John's [teaching]."⁸ How do we live faithfully in the wealthiest country in the world?

Christians can be victims of the Stockholm syndrome, the psychological response of starting to cooperate with one's captors. We too easily come to terms with evil winning the day. We have trouble believing the culture will ever be overthrown. We are used to the lies, but God's truth will win. We are used to innocent people dying, but God will give life eternal. We are used to being surrounded by despair, but God will bring hope. Evil, sorrow, and death will be swallowed up in the Hallelujah Chorus. The rider on the white horse and the party in heaven seem far away most days, but what we believe about the future affects the way we live each day.

Believing that the end belongs to God breaks the power of the world, and fills us with a hope that continues even in sorrow. Woodrow Wilson said, "I would rather fail in a cause that will ultimately triumph than to triumph in a cause that will ultimately fail."

If we believe that God will win, then sorrow is finally less permanent. The minister and scholar James Stewart describes a painting hanging in a museum in Scotland—a picture of a man playing chess with the devil in order to secure his soul. The man, who has only a few pieces on the board, looks dejected. Satan is smiling; he will soon checkmate the man. For years people came to the gallery and saw only hopelessness. Then one day a chess champion stood for hours looking at the chessboard. Finally he announced: "It's a lie. The king still has moves left."

The biggest questions for all of us remain: "Is the future still in God's hands? To what are we heading? Who will have the final word? What's going to happen?" God is going to happen. God will triumph. God is at the end of it all.

In New York City there's a church with a statue of the angel Gabriel on the roof. His horn is lifted to his mouth, ready to blow a mighty blast to announce God's coming. Day after day, Gabriel stands ready. Warmed by the summer sun, frozen by winter sleet, year after year goes by, but no mighty blast—not even a tentative toot. The streets of the city below are crawling with traffic, lined with apartments and businesses. There is birth, death, love, conflict, and a thousand shattered hopes between dawn and sunset every day. To most of the people on the street, Gabriel must seem silly, but if we listen carefully we may hear Gabriel clearing his throat. If we

listen carefully we may hear distant hoof beats, the roll of thunder, and the sound of a choir warming up.

NOTES

1The *Rapture Index* is online at raptureready.com/rap2.html.

2 Joseph Seiss, *Lectures on the Apocalypse*, ninth edition (New York: Cook, 1906), 3:199.

3 Suetonius reports the Emperor's sacrilege in *The Lives of the Caesars, Book 8: Domitian 13*, translated by J.C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 2:367.

4 William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, revised edition (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1976), 2:169.

5 David MacLeod, "Heaven's Hallelujah Chorus: An Introduction to the Seven 'Last Things' Revelation 19:1-10," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 156 (January-March 1999), 76.

6 Marin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper, 1940), 375.

7 Roger A. Bullard, "Pictures at an Exhibition: Revelation 19:1-10," *Review and Expositor* 98 (Winter 2001), 116.

8 Warren Carter, "Left Behind," *Christian Century* (February 10, 2009), 8.



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