

Before the Curtain Rises

Thy Kingdom Come – Part I

Selected Scripture

Introduction

We have been studying the book of Revelation and will return to our study today. We have just wrapped up our thirtieth study on the period of time known as the Tribulation.

As we ended this part of our study, I did something I have never done before – I covered an entire chapter of Revelation in one sermon. It was chapter 17 and it took nearly an hour. Then, the next Sunday, I covered all of chapter 18 in one sermon.

You were probably ready for our summer series by then! You were also probably wondering what caused me to speed up like that – covering an entire chapter in one sermon. I will tell you what was happening – God was answering your prayers!

Well, this may be so, but I was actually just trying to get us out of the Tribulation. And we finished Revelation chapter 18 just before the summer break.

As I prepared to re-engage in this study with you, it occurred to me that we should set the stage for the next event in prophetic scripture following the Tribulation. This will be the most magnificent and glorious event ever to be seen on earth – the coming kingdom of Jesus Christ and His reign with us, His bride, in the New Jerusalem.

In order to set the stage for this, today I will do something I have never done before – simply review where we have been. Even though I know you have it all down pat, let us use our study time today to review. We have also had so many new friends begin coming to our church over the past year, I would like for all of us to start on the same page.

If you have ever been to a play – maybe you have been to one on Broadway or you have been to your kid's middle school or high school play – you know what it is like before the curtain rises on the next scene. You can hear movement; maybe a bump or two. If there is a gap between the curtain and the stage floor, you can see feet moving all around the stage. You can hear the sliding of furniture and other set pieces that are being put in place.

Although you cannot see them, you know the stage manager is in control of all the moving parts – directing the stage crew and readying the actors to make sure that every prop and every person is in place. Then, the curtain rises and the audience is swept into another scene as the drama unfolds.

This is us right now. We are the audience – watching and listening while the stage is set.

The curtain is closed so we cannot see all the details, but we can catch glimpses of movement. We cannot interpret all the sounds we hear, but we know the Director is in control. All the set pieces and all the players are under His sovereign direction. The stage is being set.

Let me quickly say that if you have never given your heart, life, mind, and body to Jesus Christ – do it now. The curtain might rise before this sermon is over. Accept Christ as your sovereign Lord, now.

You do not have to wait to walk up to the front at the end of this service, which we certainly invite you to do if you want counsel or help. You do not have to join this church, give money away, get baptized, or turn over a new leaf. These might be wonderful evidences that you genuinely belong to Jesus Christ,

but they come after the fact. Settle with God right where you sit. The curtain could go up today.

Now, when we attend a play, we typically get a program that tells which scene will occur next. Sometimes the program includes a brief synopsis of each scene.

The body of Christ has also been given this kind of program – it is called the book of Revelation. In it we can read a brief synopsis of each scene that will occur, as well as a list of scenes yet to unfold.

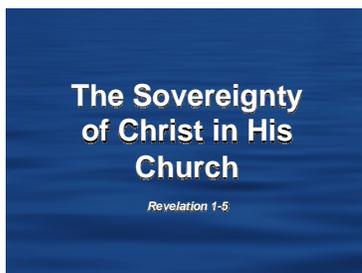
By studying our program, taking it at face value, we know that we are in the first few chapters of Revelation; the period of time known as the church age.

We also know that when the curtain rises on the next scene in God's redemptive drama – the rapture of the church – the scene that will follow closely behind is the Tribulation period. Then the next scene opens with the coming kingdom of Christ on earth.

Have you got all that? Well, let us slow this down a little.

I want to push the rewind button today. Before we get to the next scene, let us spend some time reviewing what we have already witnessed and how it prepares us for what happens next.

I have outlined the book of Revelation into four main sections. I gave you this outline when we started this study two years ago. Some of you might have lost it, so let me give it to you again.



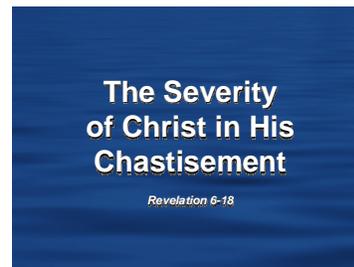
The first section includes chapters 1-5, which I have outlined as: **The Sovereignty of Christ in His Church.**

The church appears in the first five chapters of Revelation. In the first three chapters, the church is on earth. In chapters 4 and 5, the church is worshipping God in heaven, having been raptured from the earth.

Not surprisingly, there are no more appearances of the church on earth until after chapter 18. Why? Because from chapter 6 of Revelation through chapter 18, the time of Tribulation occurs on planet Earth. During this Tribulation period, the church has

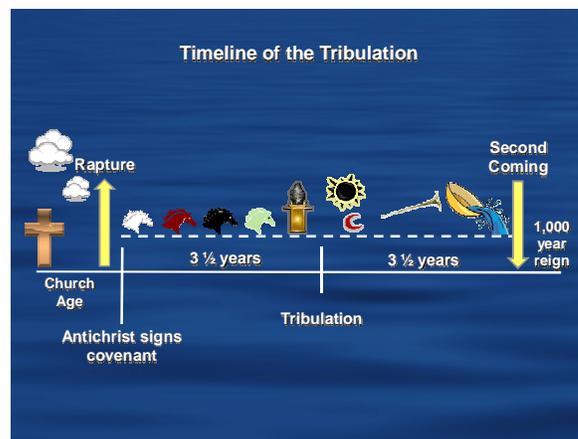
been promised to be removed away and apart from the presence of God's wrath on the earth.

So chapters 1-5 reveal the sovereignty of Christ in His relationship to His bride, the church.



The second major division of our program includes chapters 6-18, which I have outlined as: **The Severity of Christ in His Chastisement.**

This is the Tribulation period during which God pours out His wrath on humanity and planet Earth.



To set the stage for the next event on God's calendar, let us look at exactly what this period of time is. This is the period of time on this timeline that takes place between the yellow arrows – one pointing up, representing the rapture of the church, and one pointing down, representing the return of Christ with the church to set up His kingdom

This will be a seven year period of unparalleled human suffering that will include demonic boldness, cosmic disturbances, Jewish awakening, gospel preaching, and global crises unlike the world has ever witnessed in its history.

The four horsemen of the apocalypse thunder forth unleashing the plagues of God's wrath and human suffering through one act of judgment after another.

Cosmic disturbances will occur, from the moon turning blood red to the Sun flaring to strike the earth with great heat.

Natural disasters will come one after another, striking the earth over and over again as the angels

sound trumpets. Then the final blows of God's judgment come one upon another, signified by the pouring out of wrath as water is poured from bowls.

At this point in time, no one will be worshipping "Mother Earth" anymore. There will be no more Earth Day. "Mother Nature" will no longer be a cute title used by the politically correct; it will be a monster of great torment.

Why? Because the created order, which by this time has reached the status of divinity – and the universe considered almighty, as it is today – will turn on mankind at the command of Creator God. Nature will become the agent of God's punishing hand.

Matthew Henry wrote, over a century ago, that the unbelieving world thinks that everything belongs to them. In his words, "they believe this is their earth, their air, their sea, their rivers, their world, and that they alone have the right to judge."ⁱ

The world will discover the error they have made all along. This is the Creator's earth; this is His air, His seas, His rivers, His world, and He alone has the right to judge.

God will use the idols of mankind to crush mankind.

Nature will run riot as natural disasters along with disease and unparalleled crime and starvation will reach such devastating levels that by the end of the Tribulation, coffins will not be crafted fast enough and corpses will lie out in the open. In fact, Revelation informs us that by the end of the Tribulation, half the world's population will be dead.

During this seven year period, primarily the last half of the Tribulation when the antichrist declares himself to be god, demonic activity will also run rampant as Satan and his antichrist have their way in ruling the world.

The purpose of the Tribulation

Why does all of this unfold; what is the purpose of the Tribulation?

First and foremost, it is for Israel. I remember reading one critic of Revelation who said, "The book of Revelation is so Jewish!" It is.

All the prophecies of Israel's re-gathering and awakening in Revelation will come to pass as Israel is not only re-gathered, but converted.

The prophets Isaiah, Amos, Zechariah, Daniel, and more spoke with certainty of Israel's national conversion, as an ethnic people, and return to the land

of their fathers. Understand, in fact, that one of the ongoing evidences that God will keep His promise to Israel is that Israel not only exists today, but has a national conscience, a national heritage, and a national vision. From the time of Father Abraham to today, thousands of years later, the Hebrew people have existed.

When the recent Olympics were held, we did not see any athletes marching into the stadium during the opening ceremonies from the Hittite nation, did we? We did not see any Ninevites either, or Gergashites, or Jebusites, or Ammonites, or any other mosquito bites. We did not see any Philistines competing in the long jump, did we? No, because long ago they lost their national identity and were absorbed into the peoples of the world. Not the Israelites, however.

The Tribulation will be the period of time when ethnic Israel – this elect nation – will experience national conversion and the fulfillment of God's covenant to them as they inherit the land, the promise, and the throne forever (Romans 11).

Let me remake the statement again – perhaps the last time, if you keep praying – the Tribulation is not a time for the church to suffer the wrath of God. It will not suffer His wrath then or at any other time, for that matter.

I have had people say to me, "Stephen the only reason you believe in the rapture is because you don't want to go through the Tribulation."

"No kidding! Did you come up with that all by yourself?"

I will not say that, but I will usually ask them, "Why do you think the church should suffer through the Tribulation?"

They will typically say something like, "Because the church needs to be purified."

First of all, this is terrible theology – both practically and biblically.

It is terrible practical theology, because when someone says, "The church really needs to be purified first before it enjoys the kingdom of God," I want to ask them which church they are talking about. Are they talking about:

- the church in Sudan where thousands of believers have been slaughtered;
- the churches in Iran and Saudi Arabia where to accept Christ is to lose your life;
- the church in China which is continuing to imprison and torture believers?

The problem is that they are interpreting prophecy through American eyes; through Western eyes. The blood of the martyrs is flowing now more than ever around the world.

I received the latest publication from the Voice of the Martyrs organization, which surveys the world scene for testimonies of those who die for their faith in Christ. I could hardly put down this updated version, which added the years 2000 to 2006.

There were testimonies like the one of an evangelical pastor named Benestey Escobar in Columbia. Escobar was confronted by Marxist guerrillas as they stormed into his church service, dropping onto the floor the body of a Christian they had recently killed. They told the thirty-five-year-old pastor that unless he left their village, he would end up like this person. He refused to leave. Two weeks later, they returned to his church service, walked up, and shot him in the leg, warning him again to cease his preaching in their community. He refused, saying he would obey God and continue his ministry. They said they would return in two weeks. They kept their promise and returned two weeks later, dragged him out of the pulpit and into the street, where, in front of his wife, children, and congregation, they shot him repeatedly until he died.ⁱⁱ

Not long ago, North Korean Christians were herded together and their children were taken from them to be hung until they died unless the parents recanted. The parents refused to abandon their faith in Jesus Christ and as their children were being hanged, they all began to sing together through their tears, "More love to Thee, O Christ, more love to Thee."ⁱⁱⁱ

This latest publication documented the suffering and even martyrdom of believers in country after country in just the last few years.

So when I hear some well-meaning believer say, "The church needs to go through the Tribulation because it needs to suffer," I think, "How utterly embarrassing!"

Wake up! This is terrible practical theology simply because the church has been suffering, as the scriptures prophesied, since its inception 2,000 years ago.

Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (II Timothy 3:12)

It is also poor biblical theology according to the doctrinal teaching of the believers' position in Christ.

The Christian does not have to be further purified in order to enter God's presence; the believer has been purified in Christ (II Corinthians 5:21).

We, as believers, are not earning the righteousness of Christ; we have the righteousness of God through Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote in Philippians 3:9,

. . . not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith

We are not earning it – we have it!

Furthermore, the church does not merit the grace of God – that is not biblical theology. There is no list of things to do to earn the grace of God – we have been given the grace of God through the merit of Jesus Christ.

Grace is defined as unmerited favor from God. In other words, if we earned it, it would not be grace.

Paul wrote to the Ephesian church,

In [Christ] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace

which He lavished on us. . . .

(Ephesians 1:7-8a)

We watched the scene unfold earlier in Revelation chapters 4 and 5, in which we, the raptured church, sang to our gracious Redeemer.

The church is symbolized by twenty-four elders wearing white garments, as Christ promised His church; wearing crowns upon their heads, as Christ promised His church; seated upon thrones, as Christ promised His church. This is, in fact, reinforced by the apostle Paul, who wrote to the Corinthian Christians, saying,

. . . do you not know that the saints will [one day] judge the world?
(I Corinthians 6:2a)

In other words, the church in heaven during the Tribulation will return with Christ as the Tribulation comes to a close. As Christ sets up His kingdom, we, as co-regents with Him, will rule and reign in this dazzling, glorious kingdom on earth for a thousand years – and then in a new heaven and earth after that.

While we do not know when the rapture will occur, we do know that after it occurs the Tribulation will begin with an amazing peace treaty that brings peace to the Middle East. Matthew chapter 24 and Revelation chapter 6 provide a complimentary

commentary on one another in which we learn that the Tribulation period begins with the presence of peace between the nations surrounding Israel.

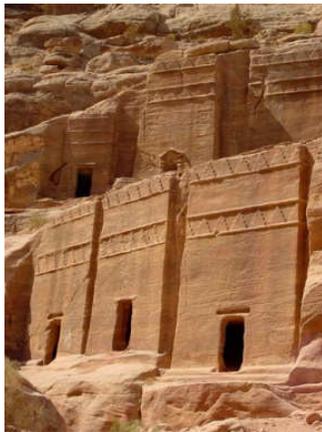
The peace maker is the soon to be revealed antichrist. He is able to broker a peace deal that settles the Middle East for a period of three and a half years.

Then, at the midpoint of the Tribulation, the enemy will launch a blood bath, primarily aimed at the Jewish people as he seeks to wipe them out in one final holocaust. This is one of the reasons the Jews flee from the antichrist who seeks to finally exterminate them, as we are told in Revelation 12:17.

This is not simply anti-Semitism. This is Satan's attempt to keep the prophecies of a reconstituted nation Israel in their land, which, if he can do it, will make null and void further prophecies of Christ ruling from David's throne in Jerusalem.

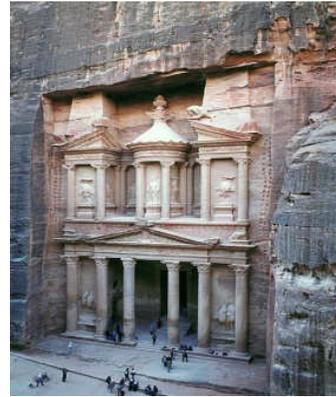
So we studied the flight of Israel and God's provision of supernatural protection while they hide.

Many evangelical Bible scholars have suggested Petra as the hiding place of the Jewish people – and for good reason.



Most of the buildings in this ancient city were literally carved into the sandstone hills a thousand years before the birth of Christ.

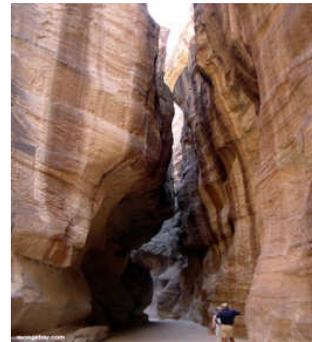
Around A.D. 551, an earthquake caused the people to abandon this area, fearing for their lives, should the mountains collapse.



Some of the buildings in Petra were beautifully carved into the mountains. Excavation has revealed major roadways, shops and homes carved deeply into the sandstone.

Petra was rediscovered in 1812 and has been a point of fascination ever since.

One of the reasons Petra would make such a great place to retreat during the Tribulation is the fact that it is easy to defend.



Most of the buildings can only be reached on foot, or by donkey or camel.



Enemy soldiers would, in fact, have a difficult time sending a large army into this area without having to march in single file.

Since much of Petra is surrounded by sheer cliffs, this would certainly be an easy area to protect.

We also know that the antichrist's agenda is not only the extermination of Jews, but the exaltation of

his own divinity as he forges a one-world government and a one-world economy.

The concept of a one-world government, economy, and religion are not new to us today. Throughout history, the world of mankind has fought for world domination.

Alexander the Great had his dreams and hoped to one day rule the world from Babylon.

Napoleon attempted this as well, and had plans drawn up for the rebuilding of Babylon.

None of the attempts at a unified world system under the rule of one man have yet to succeed.

As we look around today at the rising number of nations clamoring for a one-world government and a one-world economy, and we see major religious bodies shedding as much of their beliefs as they can in order to somehow forge a unified religion, we cannot help but wonder if this is indeed *the* time.

We cannot help but wonder if the footsteps we see scurrying around under the stage curtain and the sounds of props being slid into place signal that this is indeed the moment in world history in which the curtain will rise, the church will be raptured, and the Tribulation will soon begun.

I found it fascinating that between our last session and this session, several news items came across my desk.

This summer, the summit was held by the largest governments in the northern hemisphere – commonly known as G8. The delegations that met included the United States, Canada, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, Germany, Japan, and Italy. Each year these countries hold a summit meeting and part of their agenda is discussion of a global economy.

What made news this summer, following the latest G8 Summit, was the president of Russia calling for a currency to replace the dollar and the euro and every other national currency.



He even pulled from his pocket a sample coin that had already been minted in Belgium and presented it to each delegation at the summit.

On the face of the coin are the words, “unity in diversity”. The president of Russia said that the fact that these coins are being minted “means they’re getting ready. I think it’s a good sign that we understand how interdependent we are.”^{iv}

From what I read, Russia and China are particularly interested in seeing this global currency rolled out.

Another news item that caught my eye was that on the eve of the G8 Summit, Pope Benedict issued a statement that was presented to all the G8 leaders. His statement, issued by the Vatican, called for these leaders to establish a world political authority to oversee the economies of our world. He went on to urge the members of these eight industrial giant nations to work together to form a global political body.^v

This particular Pope has already called for unity among the major religions of the world, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

Ten years ago Robert Reich of Harvard University said with almost prophetic precision, “We are living through a transformation that will rearrange the politics and economics of the [twenty-first] century. Each nation’s primary political task will be to cope with the centrifugal forces of a global economy.”^{vi}

This is no surprise to prophetic scripture.

We have studied at length the rise of a ten-nation coalition, headed by the antichrist, which will bring about this one-world government and one-world economy and, during the last half of the Tribulation, a one-world religion.

In the same way that Nimrod attempted, in Genesis 11, to defy God as he brought the peoples together in the region between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers to build their tower of Babel, the last Nimrod – the antichrist – will call everyone together

in one unified voice to defy God and ultimately march against His city, His people, and His coming kingdom. Just as Nimrod's ancient Babylon was the first city of man to defy God, so the antichrist's Babylon will be the last city of man to defy God. There on the banks of the same river in modern-day Iraq, the capital city of Babylon will be rebuilt as the capital city of the antichrist's worldwide empire.

Babylon will rise again as the great city of man's power and rebellion against God.



Nimrod was defeated by virtue of God's confusion of mankind's one language into many languages (Genesis 11). For centuries afterward, Babylon as a city was fairly insignificant.

However, it was then built to unrivaled splendor under the rule of a king named Nebuchadnezzar. This king built the empire city of Babylon more gloriously than any city had ever been built.



Nebuchadnezzar's hanging gardens would become one of the seven wonders of the ancient world – with gardeners working 24/7.

The walls and gates of Babylon were stunning.



The most famous inner gate in Babylon was the Ishtar Gate – named in honor of Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess who was considered the Queen

of Heaven. The gate of Ishtar was made of blue slate tiles and painted with gold dragons and bulls. It was built by Nebuchadnezzar, and was also considered one of the ancient wonders of the world.

Much of this gate has been excavated and preserved. In fact, the inscription on the Ishtar gate, dating back to the time of Nebuchadnezzar, was excavated and is now in the museum in Berlin.

Let me read to you a translation of some of the inscription on this gate, ordered by Nebuchadnezzar about himself:

Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, the faithful prince appointed by the will of Marduk [their chief god] . . . has learned to embrace wisdom, who fathomed their divine being and reveres their majesty, the untiring governor who . . . is constantly concerned with the well-being of Babylon . . . the wise, the humble [I like that part] . . . the King of Babylon.

Near the end of the inscription he dictated these words:

I placed wild bulls and ferocious dragons in the gateways and thus adorned them with luxurious splendor so that people might gaze upon them in wonder.



The world would indeed marvel as they entered through these gates at the glory of Babylon and the greatness of this city of man.

It was this Babylon that defeated Jerusalem and took the Israelites into their Babylonian captivity.

One particular Jewish exile would walk through these very gates and probably gape with amazement at things he had never seen before. This teenage exile would eventually rise in power to second in command of the entire Empire of Babylon. It was this man named Daniel who would one day prophesy that this city of man would ultimately be defeated by the city of God.

John adds the details that we have studied thus far in Revelation that Babylon will be rebuilt to greater glory than before. It will try once again, at the end of human history, to overthrow the New Jerusalem as Christ descends at the end of the Tribulation.

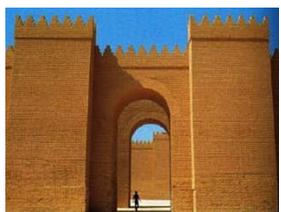
Only in the epic battle of Revelation 18, called the Battle of Armageddon, Jesus Christ, with His returning bride, defeats the armies of the antichrist as He touches down with His New Jerusalem descending from the skies.

Since the time of Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon crumbled into the dust.

Saddam Hussein attempted to rebuild some of its glory, claiming kinship with his predecessor, Nebuchadnezzar, of old.



Saddam even rebuilt a smaller version of the Ishtar gate which did not quite bring back the glory.



He also rebuilt some of Nebuchadnezzar's palace and surrounding walls, which does give us a picture of the splendor of this ancient city.

The one who will succeed in rebuilding the glory of Babylon will be the antichrist – empowered by Satan himself.

The city of man will march against Jerusalem, the city of God, and be defeated with one word of the returning King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

At this moment, the next major section – the third section – of Revelation unfolds. We are ready for the next scene in this drama of God's redemptive plan.

We have studied "The Sovereignty of Christ in His Church" – chapters 1-5.

We have studied "The Severity of Christ in His Chastisement" – chapter 6-18.

The Supremacy of Christ in His Coming

Revelation 19-20

Now we are ready to begin studying the third section in Revelation, which includes chapters 19-20, that I have outlined as: **The Supremacy of Christ in His Coming.**

Now some of the Type A students heard me say earlier that I have outlined the book of Revelation into four sections – and I have only given three of them. They are going to come up later and ask me what the fourth section is called.

The Satisfaction of Christ in His New Creation

Revelation 21-22

So I will give the fourth section of Revelation, which includes chapters 21-22, to you now, outlined as: **The Satisfaction of Christ in His New Creation.**

How long will it be before we study this fourth and final section on heaven? I do not know. We might just enter it before we study it!

I am convinced the stage is being set! We can see movement beneath the curtain; we can hear muffled sounds that indicate the props on the stage of human history are being set for the next scene.

I like the words to the old gospel chorus that sums it all up rather simply. The words are:

It won't be old Buddha

That's sittin' on the throne

And it won't be old Mohammed

That's calling us home

And it won't be Hare Krishna

That plays that trumpet tune

Cause we're going to see the Son,

Not Reverend Moon.

Amen to that!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 8/23/2009 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Stewart Custer, From Patmos to Paradise (BJU Press, 2004), p. 174.

ⁱⁱ John Foxe, Foxe: Voices of the Martyrs (Bridge-Logos, 2007), p. 472.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 425.

^{iv} <http://www.bloomberg.com>, July 10, 2009.

^v Rachel Donadio, "Pope Urges New World Economic Order," The New York Times (July 7, 2009).

^{vi} Mark Bailey, The Road to Armageddon (Word Publishing, 1999), p. 50.