

Armageddon

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At a time of special stress like the present, when the face of Europe is a war map, and the strife of nations is suggesting to the minds of many the word "Armageddon," it may be well for us to take heed to our bearings, and recall afresh the great principles laid down in Scripture, which would enable us to find our way through the actual circumstances in which we are found. And first, we have to consider the governmental ways of God with this world; and then, His special purposes in regard to the church. And let it be clearly understood at the outset that, great and terrible as may be the carnage, and the destruction of men and money, with all the consequent horrors of this gigantic struggle, taking into account, too, its end, whatever that end may be, it is not the "Armageddon" of Revelation 16:16. Call it Armageddon if you like, and a very suitable name it might be for it in a topical sense; but, terrible as the thought of what the struggle may be, it is not even the "beginning of sorrows" (Matt. 24:8) that are yet to burst, in the red-hot wrath of God, on a world that has so long defied His authority, blasphemed His name, corrupted His holy things, crucified His Son, and deliberately endorsed its rejection of Him and its choice of a highwayman and a murderer in His stead. Action and reaction, in the physical world, are equal and opposite. Cause and effect are commensurate, though at first sight the consequences may seem disproportionate, for a spark may explode a powder magazine; but in reality the apparent disproportion is governed by an inexorable law, and he who would apportion the one must understand its ratio to the other. It might appear a small thing in the history of the world to kill a man; but what that act involved in the death of Christ is understood only by its relation to the glory of God. If Christ is the incarnate Son of God, the Hope of Salvation, and the divinely appointed channel of blessing for mankind, then the treatment awarded Him by the world, both Jew and Gentile, religious and imperial, must eventuate, when the patience of God has run its course, in a judgment commensurate with the crime; God's ways in government must be vindicated, and "judgment must return unto righteousness," from which it has been so long divorced, and then "all the upright in heart shall follow it."

This is all laid down in the Old Testament as the basis of the ways of God in government with this world. Its principles are immutable; its action is inexorable, through all times and dispensations; the sphere of its operation is universal. The Apostle Peter in his epistles extends these principles into Christian times, and expands them into the eternal world, basing what he says on the utterances of the prophets, dimly apprehended by them. But all this must be kept clear and distinct from the purposes of God with regard to the church. The throne of God in government, and the purposes of God in Christ, are subjects of paramount importance, each in its own sphere; but they must not be confounded.

“He made known His ways unto Moses,” and the great lines on which they run are laid down in brief in the Pentateuch, and expounded in greater detail in the prophets; “He made known His acts to the children of Israel,” that with the evidence of their own experience they might put their trust in Him (cf. Ps. 78); and to us “He has made known the mystery of His will.” Each of these is distinct from the other, and they must not be confounded; but they are all bound up in the revelation He has been pleased to make, and compounded into the unity of the whole.

Government is the power that keeps everything in right relation to everything else in the sphere in which this power is exercised. The order of the universe hangs upon it. Every sphere in creation is dependent on it for its stability. It is true alike in the physical and in the moral world. God sits on the throne of the universe. The heavens declare His glory, and the firmament is a witness to His handiwork. There order reigns supreme; and the intelligence falls prostrate before the picture of its perfection.

Israel was set apart to be the exponents morally of the government of God on earth. They were His “witnesses” (Isa. 43:10-12). But they did “worse than the heathen”; and when Christ came to call them to repentance, “they cast Him out and killed Him.” It is true that, in the grace of God, that death has an atoning character; but in His governmental ways the nations of the world that banded themselves in that wicked deed, beginning with Jerusalem, must pay the penalty of their wickedness. In Matthew 24 we have the prophetic outline of the “great tribulation such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall be; and if those days had not been cut short no flesh had been saved”; while in Luke 21 the Lord forecasts for His disciples the taking of Jerusalem by Titus, as preliminary to the distress that is still future. This is “the time of Jacob’s trouble, but he shall be saved out of it” (Jer. 30:7), and the result will be the deliverance of the remnant, who will then “serve the Lord their God and David their king” (Jer. 30:9), corresponding to the establishment of “the kingdom of God,” according to Luke 21:31.

Now it is important to take note of this, because it is quite plain that such is not the result of any of the wars that have hitherto taken place, nor can we look for such an issue from the conflict of nations which we see today before us. No doubt all things tend to the accomplishment of God’s purposes; but, *ceteris paribus*, this war is the same essentially as any other war, bringing suffering and sorrow in its train. The sword at all times is one of God’s “four sore judgments” (Ezek. 14:21). But our business is to vindicate the righteousness of God in sending it, to look to Him to show mercy to His poor people in the midst of it, and to keep our souls trusting Him through it, whatever may happen. We would do well to remember His word in Psalm 37:8, “Fret not thyself in any wise to do evil.” It is as true today as when the Psalmist wrote it. “The salvation of the righteous is of the Lord; He is their strength in the day of trouble. And the Lord shall help them and deliver them; He shall deliver them from the wicked, and save

them, because they trust in Him" (Ps. 37:39-40).

Now all this has to say to the governmental ways of God, and the subject is dealt with, as stated above, in the epistles of Peter, showing the delivering power of God for the righteous out of all their troubles. The Apostle Paul has another line of ministry altogether; not in contradiction to that of Peter, but supplementary to it, as completing the word of God. His gospel introduces another phase of divine power, according to His purposes in grace; a power of deliverance, not "out of," but "from" the evil. It is thus his gospel begins, as appears in his epistle to the Thessalonians. They were recently converted, babes, as we might say, in the faith, to whom he addresses himself as a nursing mother" (1 Thess. 2:7). To them he would naturally give the first rudiments of the gospel, setting them in the fundamental relationships of Christian life, and instructing them in the primary truths of this new religion they had but lately received. Mark how he opens his letter to them (chap. 1:9): "Ye turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to await His Son from the heavens, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus, our deliverer from the wrath that is coming." He does not say "deliverance from out of it," but "from it" altogether. This wrath, long foretold, is coming surely. It is coming on the Jew and on the Gentile; but Jesus is our deliverer from it. Accordingly, we are not looking for deliverance through it; we are "looking for the Lord Himself from heaven, who shall come with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God. The dead in Christ shall rise first; then we, the living who remain, shall be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and thus we shall be always with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:16).

In 2 Thessalonians the Apostle briefly and graphically pictures out the trend of things as regards this world, the apostasy and Antichrist, the climax of ungodliness; truly an appalling picture to contemplate. Evidently the minds of the saints had been troubled by the "signs of the times" and rumours, and the cataclysm they seemed to portend. The Apostle sums it all up before them with prophetic prescience and paints the picture to them blacker than they could conceive. But then he rallies them in the assurance, repeated from his first epistle, and more strongly enforced here, that their part is outside of it all. "We are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation, through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth, whereunto He called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 2:13-14); and he urges on them "by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and by our gathering together unto Him," according to 1 Thessalonians 4:13, etc., "not to be soon shaken from a steady and soberly judging mind," not deceived by any means, however specious, "as though the day of the Lord had come" (2 Thess. 2:1-3). Before that day comes on the earth we shall be caught up to meet the Lord from heaven. Whatever happens among the nations below, our place, and for ever, is with the Lord above. Great changes in the map of Europe will probably result from this titanic struggle.

Dynasties may fall, and other forms of government replace them. But the present coalition of the powers is not what Scripture leads us to expect, when the forces of the north and the south, as presaged by Assyria and Egypt, prepare for the final shock, in conflict for universal power and the possession of Jerusalem and the Holy Land (cf. 2 Kings 23:29; Jer. 46:2). David slew the lion and the bear and the Philistine—picture of the forces of the south and the north and the power of Satan in the land—and delivered the defenceless people of God—type of final salvation by the outstretched hand of the Great Shepherd.

In result, then, and in view of present circumstances, we must not confound the righteous judgments of God upon the nations with His purposes in regard to the church and the rapture of the saints to meet the Lord in the air, before these judgments fall. Enoch was caught away—translated by the power of God, before the flood; Noah was saved through it. In whatever trouble we may find ourselves, we may always trust the Lord to bring us through it, even if He land us at the other side; but our hope is Himself from heaven ere the great day of trial comes.