

CHAPTER 1

Armageddon: The Devil's Payday

The morning of January 16, 1991, I was attending a class on the biblical doctrine of end-time events when the news broke that United Nations forces had attacked Iraq. The professor cancelled the afternoon session. The rest of that day and on into the next, we kept our eyes riveted on our television sets.

Fifty days later, Saddam Hussein's troops hunkered in underground bunkers as Allied aircraft pounded them with a hail of bombs. The petrified Iraqi soldiers defected to the Allies in droves.

The Gulf War was very real to those of us who saw it on our television sets. But it was a thousand times more real to those who experienced it.

I have bad news for you. Another war is just around the corner, and it's going to make Desert Storm seem like a kids game of cowboys and Indians. Revelation calls this coming war Armageddon. Fortunately, we haven't been left in the dark - Revelation has a lot to say about this war. Let's look at a few of its more descriptive verses:

- The dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring (chapter 12:17).

- I saw a beast coming out of the sea....He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them (chapter 13:1, 7).

- I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The ten horns...are ten kings. They will make war against the Lamb (chapter 17:3, 12, 14).

- Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army (chapter 19:19).

This war actually began in heaven thousands of years ago when Satan, also called the devil, rebelled against God. A third

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of the angels sided with him, and because of their rebellion, the devil and these followers of his were expelled from heaven and cast into the earth (verse 9). The devil's conflict against God has continued on our planet ever since.

Armageddon will simply be the end-time battle of that war, when the devil will learn all about the consequences of rebelling against God.

Right now this war doesn't seem real, does it? - you and I "chatting" about it in the same detached sort of way we talk about Rome's conquest of Greece two thousand years ago. But the conflict between Greece and Rome is history. No one will ever feel the terror of that war again. Armageddon, on the other hand, is future - and I believe it's very near. You and I are staring the devil eyeball to bloodshot eyeball, and he's belching his sulfurous breath in our nostrils.

I don't want to terrify you, but I hope you'll get emotional enough about Armageddon that you'll want to know more about it. I'd like to go back over those descriptions we just read from Revelation and analyze them one at a time with you. Let's see what we can learn about this end-time battle. Who will be the main participants?

War with the dragon

"The dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring" (Revelation 12:17).

What or who is this dragon? Who is the "woman" he's attacking? And who are her offspring?

Revelation tells us exactly who the parties in this conflict are. We've already learned that the dragon is Satan - the devil. The woman and her offspring represent "those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (verse 17). Those are God's people - Christians, if you please!

War with the sea beast

Immediately after John's report about the dragon's attack on the woman, he introduces us to a powerful creature that stalks out of the ocean: "I saw a beast coming out of the sea," he says. "He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns

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on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name” (Revelation 13:1).

Picture it, if you will - this monster with seven heads, each with a blasphemous name burned into its forehead. It stamps its way across the beach, water pouring off its back and running in rivulets back into the ocean.

What on earth is this beast?

For one thing, it is very powerful. People all over the world will follow it, and they will ask, “Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?” (verse 4). This beast is invincible! Nobody can attack him and win.

Yet a few courageous people do try. Revelation says this beast was “given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them” (verse 7). The saints - that’s God’s people again - will resist this beast. They will pay a heavy price for their resistance, though. Revelation says that the beast will conquer the saints. God’s people are doomed!

Or are they?

War with the scarlet beast

The next reference to Armageddon comes in Revelation 17. This chapter opens with a word picture of a prostitute riding on a scarlet beast that, like the beast in chapter 13, has seven heads and ten horns.

The reference to war comes in verse 14, which says, “They will make war against the Lamb.”

“They” refers to the ten horns on the scarlet beast, and verse 12 explains that these horns represent ten kings. Kings means “heads of state,” which in our day can include presidents and prime ministers. In the broadest sense, these kings represent the nations over which they rule. There are far more than ten nations in the world today. Revelation’s “ten kings” should probably be understood to represent all the nations of the world at the time of this final conflict.¹

Now note this: “They [the nations of the world] will make war against the Lamb.”

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So the nations of the world join the devil on one side, while the Lamb is on the other. And who is this “Lamb”? The “Lamb” in Revelation always represents Jesus Christ.²

How amazing! Jesus Christ Himself will be one of the contestants in earth's final conflict! And Revelation says “the Lamb will overcome them [earth's nations] because he is Lord of lords and King of kings” (chapter 17:14).

The rider on the horse

Revelation's final picture of this battle comes in chapter 19: “I saw heaven standing open,” John says, “and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war” (verse 11).

Revelation goes on to say that “the armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean” (verse 14). The phrase “armies of heaven” probably refers to the angels (chapter 12:7-9).

We know, of course, that the devil will be on the other side. Does this passage say anyone will join him? Oh yes! John says, “I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army” (chapter 19:19).

The participants in Revelation 19 are exactly the same as those in chapter 17 - Jesus and His followers on one side and the devil and his followers on the other. And chapter 19 indicates the same outcome. It says “the beast was captured” - taken prisoner of war, if you please! - and was “thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur” (verse 20).

Just a moment ago, we read the question in Revelation 13:4, “Who can make war against [the beast]?” Chapter 19 answers that question: Jesus, the rider on the white horse, can make war against the beast - and defeat him!

Let's find out what else Revelation tells us about Armageddon.

When will it happen?

The battle of Armageddon will have two phases; the first phase will begin a short time before Jesus' second coming. In this phase the war will take the form of persecution against

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God's people all over the world. For example, Revelation says the forces of evil will decree that anyone who refuses to worship in the politically correct way will be killed (chapter 13:15). At this stage of the war, it will appear that the devil and his followers are winning. That's why the prophet John said the beast "will make war against the saints and conquer them" (verse 7).

The second phase of the battle of Armageddon will be fought at Christ's second coming. Most Bible commentators agree that the word picture in Revelation 19 of Jesus and His armies riding out of heaven on white horses is a symbolic description of the second coming of Christ.

Where will it happen?

In the Hebrew language, the word Armageddon means "Mount of Megiddo." There is no Mount Megiddo in Palestine, but there is a valley of Megiddo. This has led many Christians to believe that earth's end-time conflict will take place in that valley.

However, as we have seen, this battle will take place between Christ and Satan and their followers. Since every human being will join one side or the other, we can conclude that Armageddon will not be limited to one spot on earth. The battlefield will be the globe.

Armageddon, you, and me

In essence, this war that we are talking about has actually been going on since Satan tempted Eve in Eden. It's the age-old conflict between good and evil, and it's been going on inside of you and me all our lives.

Every person involved in a war has to make choices, from the general who plans the overall strategy to the soldier crawling through the mud and grass, trying to decide whether to shoot the enemy or take him prisoner.

The battle between good and evil in your heart and mine also involves choices. What choice do you make, for example, when you have the opportunity to cheat on your income-tax return? What happens when you're burning-up angry at someone and you can either explode or keep quiet? What do

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you do when someone at work seems more attractive than your spouse? You and I are confronted with choices like these every day of the year.

The war is real right now!

Armageddon is still future. But it, too, will involve choices regarding spiritual and moral issues. If you don't remember anything else in this chapter, I hope you keep the following in mind: Unless we choose to change, you and I will make the same spiritual and moral choices in earth's final conflict as we are making right now.

The powerful beast that emerges from the sea in Revelation 13 appears to be invincible. During the first part of this conflict, nobody can make war against him. The saints (that's you and me) try, but the beast conquers them. In Revelation 19, however, the rider on the white horse engages this beast in battle, defeats him, and throws him into a lake of burning sulfur.

Revelation 17:14 says that the nations of the earth "will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings - and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers."

Let's unpack that verse, shall we? The most exciting part is that Jesus Christ is going to win the battle of Armageddon! And the next most exciting part is that you and I will be with Him!

Actually, I'd like to turn that around and say that Jesus will be "with" you and me during the battle of Armageddon. Isn't that what He promised two thousand years ago? He said, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). He's going to keep that promise right to the finish line!

Every now and then, I meet people who are so frightened of the end time that they weep and wail and wring their hands. But I get excited when I realize that Jesus will be on your side and my side in the final conflict. Armageddon can't hurt us, because our Leader is King over all the kings of the earth and Lord over all its lords!

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But how about the devil, who started this war thousands of years ago in heaven when he rebelled against God? What will be his fate? Revelation says that the beast will be “thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur,” and eventually the devil himself will be cast into this same lake of fire (chapters 19 20-20:10).

Satan will be destroyed! That will be his reward for the havoc he's wreaked on this earth for thousands of years. Armageddon will truly be “the devil's payday.”

Yes, the war is real - so real, in fact, that for a while, it will look like God's people are losing and Satan is winning. But during the battle of Armageddon, God's people will have Jesus on their side, and He will defeat all of their enemies, including the devil himself, who has been trying so desperately to destroy them.

And if we choose to put ourselves on Jesus' side today, we are assured that He will keep us on His side in the final, most intense battle this world has ever known.

1. Some people identify these ten kings with the nations of the European Common Market. However, John's description suggests a global conflict.

2. See, for example, Revelation 5:6. The lamb in chapter 13:11 refers to a false Christ.