

*APOCALYPTIC SKETCHES.*

VII.

THE SEVEN VIALS.

REV. XV., XVI.

WE have now reached the series in which "is finished the wrath of God." We shall find it compressed into a single chapter (xvi.). One reason why it can be brought into such brief compass is that there is no episode between the sixth and seventh as in former series; but we have something corresponding to it in the special vision of consolation in chapter xv. 2-4. There seems good reason for finding it on this occasion at the beginning instead of between the sixth and seventh. The seventh seal was to open out into a series of seven trumpets, hence the vision of consolation before it; and again the seventh trumpet was to open out into a series of seven vials, so that again we have a heartening in advance; but the seventh vial has no further series in it, for it is the close of all. We need not wonder, therefore, that the consolatory vision should be found, not between the sixth and seventh in this case, but in the opening of the entire series. Hence the pause and the break between verses 1 and 2 of this chapter.

These reassuring visions are always anticipatory. They are addressed to the hope of the seer and the saints. They are intended to show what is to be the final outcome of the judgments which in the prophecy they introduce. In the great vision of the Throne of God and of the Lamb before the opening of the first series (iv., v.) we hear the song of the Elders and the living creatures, and the angels, and the whole creation of God. In the vision of the sealing between the sixth and seventh seal (vii.) we see "a great multitude whom no man can number

out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation, standing before the throne clothed in white robes and palms in their hands." In the vision of the measuring between the sixth and seventh trumpet (xi. 1-13) we see the two witnesses whose dead bodies had lain dishonoured in the street of the great city where their Lord was crucified, raised like Him from the dead, and like Him ascending into heaven in a cloud of glory. In the vision of the Lamb upon Mount Zion (xiv.) we hear again the harpers harping with their harps, and the glad music of the new song, and later on behold (14-16) the Son of Man coming on a white cloud to gather in the great harvest of the world. In every case we are carried right on beyond all the intervening darkness and trouble to the glorious consummation. So is it once more in the opening of this catastrophic vision of the seven vials; we see on to the very close of the mighty conflict, and hear the song of the victors beside the glassy sea. Again, as before, the last is first and the first is last—we first catch a glimpse of the end and then go through the dark tunnel which leads to it. It will suit us on this occasion to take the order of time; so we shall reserve the splendours of the 15th chapter till we shall have dealt with the horrors of the 16th.

Once more, in dealing with the vials, the first thing to observe is the close correspondence with the foregoing series, especially with the series of trumpets which immediately precedes it. In all the three there is the same two-fold division into four and three, four dealing specially with the visible, and three with the invisible. As in the first four trumpets, so in the first four vials, judgment is represented as falling successively on the earth or land (*v.* 2), the sea (*v.* 3), the rivers and fountains (4-7), the sun (8, 9), the only material difference being the suggestion of increased severity. In the series of the seals it was the

fourth part (vi. 8) that was smitten, in the trumpets the third part (viii. 7-11), in the vials it is the whole. In the remaining three there is also an evident correspondence with the trumpet series; for "the throne of the beast," on which the fifth vial was poured (10), corresponds to "the pit of the abyss" in the fifth trumpet, the result in each case being not death but pain, torment, to the worshippers of the dragon and the beast; the fifth vial was poured out on the river Euphrates (12), the very same spot where in the sixth trumpet the four angels were set loose; and in each case this is followed by the gathering of the hosts of the Unseen to a terrible battle; the seventh vial was poured out upon the air (17); and here, as when the seventh trumpet sent forth its blast, there are voices in heaven, and thunders and lightnings, and terrible hail. The correspondence throughout is therefore exceedingly close.

Thus we have proof after proof, as we read on in this wonderful book, that those are entirely astray who try to make it a chart of the world's history mapped out beforehand to satisfy curiosity concerning the "times or seasons which the Father hath set within His own authority," and which the Lord Himself told His disciples it was not for them to know (Acts i. 7). Suppose, for example, we can find a series of events in the history of the early Roman Empire to correspond with the seven seals—which, as we have seen, is not difficult, for it was that particular epoch in which the seer and his readers were living, and we found, as a matter of fact, that the correspondence was very close—and that later on we could light upon another series as closely corresponding to the former as the trumpets correspond to the seals, say in the middle ages, which can be done only by the most fanciful interpretation of the trumpets on the one hand, and the most violent dealing with history on the other—does any

reasonable person suppose that still a third series could be discovered, say in modern history, which would follow the same exact succession of plagues—first on the land, then on the sea, then on the rivers, then on the sun, then on the throne of the beast, then on the Euphrates, and finally on the air? Of course God can do everything; and it would be quite possible for Him to arrange the history of the world in successive cycles of seven, as closely corresponding to one another as the seals and trumpets and vials; but has He done it? Most certainly He has not. That history repeats itself is most true, but that the repetition is in any such mechanical fashion is a delusion. It certainly does not repeat itself point after point in clearly marked cycles of seven.

It is surely, therefore, most evident that these successive series have all the same application; they are all coloured by the events of the time, as well as cast in the mould of the familiar prophetic imagery of the past; they all deal with the great issues then impending, and yet they are applicable to the course of Divine Providence right on through all the centuries to the very end; for the same forces will appear and reappear, and the same conflict will be waged over and over again, generation after generation; the same issue will be reached as each generation of the redeemed joins the great multitude whom no man can number, and in all the centuries, right on to the end of the world, events will tend towards the same grand consummation of which we have so many glowing pictures in this great Apocalypse, when time shall be no longer, and all discords shall be resolved into the heavenly harmony of the new song. As in the case of the trumpets following the seals, so in the case of the vials following the trumpets, we have not another reach of history brought into the field of a great telescope, but another turn of the marvellous kaleidoscope, showing the same objects in new combinations.

From all this it follows that it is quite beside the mark to raise the question when or where or between what European or other powers shall be fought the battle of Armageddon. Har-magedon, or the Hill of Megiddo, was the most famous battlefield of the Old Testament. There Barak gained his great victory over the Canaanites (Judg. iv. and v.), and there Gideon defeated the Midianites (Judg. vii.); there Saul perished at the hand of the Philistines (1 Sam. xxxi. 8), and there King Josiah, who had joined the forces of the Assyrian monarch against Pharaoh Necho, King of Egypt, was defeated and slain by the Egyptian archers. Armageddon, therefore, was a name which would rise as readily to the lips of a Hebrew as Thermopylæ to a Greek, or Waterloo to an Englishman. The use of it would have the effect of conjuring up to the mind in the most impressive possible way the thought of fierce contending hosts. All this does not mean that there will never be a battle of Armageddon; rather it means that there may be many. There have been Armageddons in the centuries that are past since the words of this prophecy were written, and we greatly fear that we are not done with them yet.

So much for the correspondences with the preceding series; we must now call attention to the new features which emerge, the new aspects which come before us, in the final series.

First, then, as to the manner in which the series is opened. In the opening of the seals (vi.) there was the fourfold invitation from the four living creatures, each one successively calling, "Come." In the opening of the trumpet vision (viii.) there was an impressive silence of half an hour, during which the prayer-angel advanced with his golden censer to the altar of incense. In the third there is greater solemnity and impressiveness, and a combination of the former accessories with features entirely

new. As in the first series, we have the appearance of one of the living creatures; as in the second, we have the solemn movement of the angels; but the new feature is the advance from the outer court of creation, as represented by the four living creatures in the opening of the seals, and from the holy place as represented by the prayer-angel with his golden censer in the opening of the trumpets, on and in, to the inner shrine of the Divine presence, as indicated by the opening of the temple<sup>1</sup> in Heaven, the issuing of the seven angels from the inner shrine, and the voice of command coming from the same sanctuary now filled with smoke.<sup>2</sup> All this certainly betokens increased solemnity; but does it not also suggest that judgment is coming, not upon the world only, but on the Church? And this is still further indicated by the priestly vestments of the seven angels (*v.* 6). In the seals the judgment is represented simply as coming on the world. The only place the Church has in that first series is where the souls are seen under the altar, and heard crying out, "How long, O Master, the holy and true, dost Thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" In the second series we found a discrimination between the faithful and the unfaithful, and directions given in the vision of the measuring to leave out "the court which is without the temple" (*xi.* 2); and in the visions which follow the trumpets and lead up to the vials special attention is called to those who, instead of the seal of God on their foreheads, exhibit the mark of the beast. Now observe that in this third series it is on those faithless ones who have allowed themselves to be so branded that the judgment is represented specially as falling (*v.* 2). Not that the judgment of the vials is confined to the unfaithful ones in the Church; it is, like all the rest, a series of woes

<sup>1</sup> Not *τερόν*, but *ναός*=inner shrine.

<sup>2</sup> See the whole passage, *xv.* 5-xvi. 1.

coming on the earth, but it is significant that there is this singling out for special mention of those who bear the mark of the beast. And the same thought, of judgment coming on the House of God, is strikingly suggested in the solemn warning (v. 15): "Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame."

We might give, as still another indication of this, the reference to Babylon; but, in order to bring this out, it would be necessary to deal with a large and difficult subject we have not yet touched, and which will be more conveniently dealt with in our next paper on the fall of Babylon, as described in the 17th and 18th chapters.

Now that we have observed the special reference of the vials of judgment to those who have succumbed to the temptations of the ungodly and wicked world, we can see how beautifully appropriate is the vision of consolation (xv. 2-4) with which the series is specially introduced, and the consideration of which we postponed till we had looked at the great tribulation through which the victors had to pass.

This is one of those magnificent passages which bring us within hearing of the music of heaven. It is therefore dangerous to touch. Yet it may help us to see a little more of its marvellous beauty, if attention is given to some of the special features of this Hallelujah Chorus.

"The sea of glass mingled with fire"—what is this? Twelve years ago, in the beautiful month of May, I was sailing in the Ægean Sea. It was towards evening of a glorious day, and the sun was nearing the western horizon. The sea was a vast level plain, lightly ruffled by a gentle breeze, and shining in the splendour of the setting sun, making that innumerable laughter of the wavelets, the picture of which has been painted by a great Greek poet in a miniature of three words which will never die. The

angle at which the westering sun fell on these innumerable wavelets was such that every concave mirror over all the plain was aflame. And the general effect was very striking. Neither before nor since have I seen such a resplendent example of what mineralogists call the vitreous lustre, extending over the entire plain of the sea. It was a *glassy sea*. It was a glassy sea *mingled with fire*. I have seen many grand visions of nature in my day, but none, not even the Nebelmeer on the Swiss mountains, to compare with this. I have no doubt John saw it often, and I certainly do not wonder that it should find an honoured place once and again in this grand Apocalypse. The sea was no friend of John's. It was to him a symbol of estrangement, separation, tumult, darkness, and wild commotion, a raging deep from which his awful beast emerges; and all this impresses him so, that among his most characteristic utterances concerning the glory of the better land is this, "The sea is no more." But a poet such as he could not be indifferent to the beauty of the sea in its quieter aspects, especially when lighted up with the glory of the sun; and fond of contrasts as he was, we can understand how his natural aversion to the sea would make him only the more eager to show that even out of its horrors the Almighty can bring beauty to grace Heaven itself. And as he had been lately representing the dragon standing on the sand of the sea, and watching the hideous monster emerge from the waste of its waves, he will now represent the conquerors of the dragon and the beast standing on the shore, of the same sea perhaps, now no seething waste of waves, but a sea of glory, a sea of glass mingled with fire: judgment and mercy met together, righteousness and peace embracing each other, the fire of judgment adding glory to the glassy sea.

But why does he bring in the sea at all? If he desires a complete contrast, why does he not choose for his image



some pleasant plain with a river making it glad, as he does later on, when, after doing away with "the salt, unplumbed, estranging sea," he shows us the river of the water of life flowing from the Throne of God. It is because he has in view the hosts of Israel of old singing their song of victory on the placid banks of the great sea through whose angry, threatening waters they had safely passed. That old song of Moses will be taken up and blended with the new song of those who have followed the Lamb and share His victory, when, after the seals of God have all been broken, the trumpet blasts of vengeance all stilled into silence, and the vials of wrath empty for evermore, the throng of the redeemed shall gather on the eternal shore, and sing the song of Moses and the Lamb: "Great and marvellous are Thy works, O Lord, the Almighty; righteous and true are Thy ways, Thou King of the ages. Who shall not fear, O Lord, and glorify Thy name? For Thou only art holy; for all the nations shall come and worship before Thee, for Thy righteous acts have been made manifest."

Holy, holy, holy, all the saints adore Thee,  
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea,  
Cherubim and Seraphim falling down before Thee,  
Which wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.

Wilt thou share that victory and join in that new song?  
Then see that there be on thee no mark of the beast, see  
that thou be sealed with the seal of God on thy forehead!

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