

INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION - PART EIGHT

In chapter six, John's vision came down from the wonder of eternity in chapters 4 and 5 to the major reasons that men on earth ask, 'Why?' The first four, represented by the seals, deal with the consequences of Roman conquest - oppression, war, injustice and the fear of death; the next is the difficult question of why a loving God allows Christians to suffer and die for their faith; the sixth is the why of natural disasters and God's coming judgment.

Chapter seven pauses before the seventh seal of the book is broken, which will let us into God's secrets, to take another look at eternity. In verses 1 and 2 it is as if a heavenly film producer has stepped onto the set and ordered, 'Cut!' to the action. This description of the 'four winds of the earth' is another interesting confirmation that this book came from God and not from man. There are two prevailing winds in the northern hemisphere and two in the south - but the southern hemisphere was unknown to the Mediterranean world of those days.

The believers were to be sealed on their foreheads. We have already seen the seal as a mark of ownership and a guarantee. The head is where most of us do our thinking. God intends that we should have a certainty in our minds that we belong to Him and that He will never fail us even if everyone else does. The tougher the conditions the more important that rock solid certainty becomes.

Two groups were described, Israelites and Gentiles. The first group was at first sight a bit of a puzzle. When the people of Israel became divided in the Old Testament in the reign of Rehoboam (II Chron. 10) into the northern kingdom of ten tribes and the southern kingdom of Judah and Benjamin, henceforth known as Judah, the twelve tribes took very different spiritual paths. The north went steadily down hill into idolatry and eventually exile and absorption by Assyria. It would have been hard to find 12,000 from each of the ten tribes. Judah and Benjamin, on the other hand, went up and down under various leaders some of whom trusted the Lord and some did not. They too went through exile, this time in Babylon, but returned having learned their lesson. They became the Jews of the New Testament, many thousands of whom trusted Jesus. Twelve thousand from each tribe did not presumably represent an actual head count but an assurance that each Old Testament prophet, the elders of chapter 4, was used by God to bring people to Himself in the full measure that God planned. (7:1-8)

The Gentile believers were from every 'tribe, nation, people and tongue', a promise of enormous significance. History will not come to an end until every language group on earth has heard the gospel in their own tongue and some at least have responded to the message. This serves as a further reminder to us that our preoccupation should not be so much with when Jesus will return but with the task we are to perform before He does. (Mark 16:15; Matt. 28:19) However for the first time in two thousand years there is a realistic prospect of that task being accomplished within this generation.

Oneness between Jew and Gentile, and for that matter church and church, is already a reality as far as God is concerned. We are already one, not because of a political structure but because Jesus died for all of us, and all are 'clothed in white', justified before Him, and celebrating His victory. (7:9,10) As usual all of heaven, and all God has said to us through teachers and in His word agreed. (4:8-11; 5:8-14; 7:11,12) We are again invited to agree in our worship and so enjoy our oneness as a fact now on earth. It helps when we are facing persecution to know that we are not in this on our own.

John was asked if he knew who these people were, to give the angel opportunity to tell him the great news of the outcome of their suffering. Much argument has gone on throughout history as to what the great tribulation represents and when it will happen, whether before, during or after Christ's return. 'Tribulation' means 'under pressure' and is used many times in the New Testament to describe tough times for Christians. In the time in which John was writing the Jews had been through a war, in 66-70AD, in which up to a million of them had died. The Christians in Rome alone had lost tens of thousands of their number after 64AD when the Emperor Nero blamed them for a great fire he probably started himself. They were already 'under pressure'; to them it was definitely a great tribulation. What mattered to them, and to suffering churches down through history, was what the Lord would do for them in the present.(7:13-15)

The chapter closed with a lovely picture of freedom from need, suffering and of the care of the Good Shepherd.(7:16,17; Psalm 23; John 10)

8:1 Q.1 When the final seal on the book was broken what was the surprising immediate result? Why would God want a period of silence?(Hab.2:20; Zeph.1:7; Zech.2:13)

8:2-5 Q.2 Who were the seven angels who now delivered their messages?(Rev.1:20) Before the angels gave their messages what two things happened? What have we already seen was pictured by incense?(5:8) What was its use in the Old Testament?(Exod.30:7,8,34-38; Lev.2:15) What have we also seen before about the significance of thunder and lightning?(4:5) How do the two pictures go together?

8:6,7 Q.3 What kind of disaster did the first angel represent? In what way is man doing such things to himself today? What kind of questions do people ask when they face such a threat to their environment?

8:8,9 Q.4 What was the second global disaster? How might such a thing come about? In what way are we doing this to ourselves today? What effect do catastrophes like this have upon man's willingness to listen to God?

8:10,11 Q.5 What was the third major event? How could this happen? What part of the environment was threatened this time? Where had God warned that He would do such things before?(Jer.9:15; 23:15)

8:12 Q.6 What was the fourth disaster described? How does this effect happen today? What part of the environment was involved this time? What is man's response when the quality of his life begins to be affected in this manner? What is our overall responsibility for the created world in which God has put us?(Gen.1:26,28)

8:13 Q.7 Could anything worse happen than the major environmental disasters already described? How as Christians should we respond to those who ask where God is in times of serious threat to our world?