

Great and Marvelous
Revelation 15
By Gary R. May
First Baptist Church of Diana, May 25, 2011

Chapter 15 is one of the shortest chapters in the entire book of Revelation with only 8 verses. One should not let the brevity of the chapter or its narrow introduction of themes take away from its significance. As John has done repeatedly in this glorious book, he again shows the protection of the saints. The previous chapter closed with a declaration of God's impending judgment. Here, John highlights God's hand of protection.

A Great and Marvelous Sign

On multiple occasions John has pointed to signs in heaven. The sign he speaks of in verse 1 is referred to as great and marvelous. The word translated great is the Greek word *mega* which has returned to common use in this generation. Mega refers to something big. The sign in heaven is big suggesting the significance of its appearing. The second word used literally means *wonder*. This sign left one in wonder as in, hard to believe. The sign appearing is one of seven angels holding seven plagues. Perhaps the wonder of this sign is that it signifies the completion of God's wrath and the end of suffering on the earth. Thousands of years have now passed since the fall of man in the garden. The consequences of sin have been seen on the earth for all those years. The feeling is something like the feeling of someone enduring great hardship and suddenly realizing deliverance is near on the horizon. It makes one say, "I can't believe it is finally here." That is the sentiment of verse 1, the end is finally here. Perhaps John has the suffering of his fellow saints in mind, perhaps he has the suffering of Israelites through the ages firmly in his grasp, and perhaps he has in mind the visions he has just recorded. Perhaps he has all these things in mind when he expresses wonder at the fact that the end is near and the full expression of God's wrath against evil is about to be complete.

Consistent with previous warnings of judgment, the scene shifts to saints protected by the living God. Verse 2 is a picture of the saints gathered around a sea of glass. The image is not one of defeat but one of victory. The victory is emphasized as being over the beast, over his image, and over the number of his name. Satan has made himself manifest in various ways and his world system has deceived thousands through the ages. This assembled group in heaven has escaped the deception and is found assembled as the Israelites were together on the far side of the Red Sea. The correlation between the Old Testament story of the Red Sea and the sea of glass in heaven, is made firm in verse three when this group begins to sing again the song of Moses and the song of the lamb.

A Great and Marvelous Savior

Standing on the east side of the Red Sea, looking back on the river now full of water that just a few moments prior was dry ground, the Israelites surely had to marvel at the mighty works of God. You remember they were hard pressed by the Egyptian army and were closed in facing the Red Sea. Miraculously the waters opened up and the Israelites who numbered somewhere around one million five hundred thousand, crossed safely in the eyes of their enemy. The enemy pressed

after them and God closed the water miraculously drowning the Egyptian army. The Israelites knew they had been delivered by the hand of the Almighty. In a similar way, using the same symbolism, delivered saints are now seen gathered around a sea of glass singing the same song of Moses and the Lamb.

This assembly is noted as victorious yet they give glory where glory is due. They understand that it is Christ who has worked in them to bring deliverance from the great deceiver. As a result they are quick to give glory to the living God. The first praise in the song is for the works the Almighty has performed. Again John uses the words great and marvelous. The works of God, like the sign in verse, one are recognized as large. It is no small work of God that brings about the deliverance of His saints. In view here is the Lamb of God slain on the cross for deliverance. In view here is the constant working of the Holy Spirit. The reaches of His hands and the depth of His love serve to bring about deliverance. His works are not only great but they cause wonder among men and are therefore called marvelous. Surely looking back on life from the vantage point of worship in heaven, man will continue to marvel at the workings of God.

The song continues with titles reflecting God's power and authority. He is called Lord God and the Almighty. The terms add up to recognition of Holiness of God. He is the Lord and He is the only God. He is supreme above all and the use of these names demonstrates the demands falling upon humanity to treat Him with humility and respect including complete submission. While Satan is acting desperately to salvage his own kingdom, the saints of God are singing praises of God as king of the nations. It is clear to this heavenly host that the complete manifest reign of Christ is soon to fall on all the earth. Weirsbé notes that antecedents for this song include Ps. 86:9; 90:1-2; 92:5; 98:2; 111:9 and 145:17.

The song continues with a rhetorical question and answers itself. The song teaches great theological truth. Only God is holy. No conceived god is holy, but the living God is completely holy. Because all nations will worship before Him and all His righteous acts will be revealed, all shall glorify the name of God. Perhaps in view is the teaching of Paul that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. Surely even the rebellious will eventually recognize the purity of God's ways and intentions. Many have speculated that this song was arranged in such a way that the 1st century church took it up as a very important song of their worship gatherings.

Seven Angels of Wrath

John's language indicates an attitude of total astonishment at what he is seeing. Having seen so many angels and previously unexplained events, seven angels now capture his attention. These are the same angels that have the seven plagues and they emerge from the temple. They evidently have a priestly duty to perform because as they emerge from the temple their attire is reminiscent of that worn by the Old Testament priest. But their duty is not one of ministering atoning sacrifices or daily prayers; it is one of administering the wrath of God. They are girded about with golden sashes and in bright white linen. The wrath of God is distributed by the four living creatures but God is clearly the source. John reminds his audience God who lives forever and ever has decreed and is the source of the wrath about to come.

The scene in heaven continues in a way as to assure the Israelites of the connection to the past. The temple is filled with smoke which represents the glory of God. There will be no intercession while the wrath of God is made complete. The temple is full of God's power and glory yet no one can enter in during this time. It is a time when in His holiness God is unapproachable.

I find illustrations, meant to help capture the feelings John must have had, to be woefully inadequate. Even though all fall short, a few might help stretch our imagination. It must have been a time of celebration when buses left Baton Rouge bound for the New Orleans football stadium following hurricane Katrina. For days, thousands of citizens had been taking shelter in that stadium. Food and water were short and it was a difficult scene. The drama had been played out non-stop on national television. A feeling of remorseful hope must have fallen on those who witnessed the event as the busses finally left Baton Rouge that day. Soon, these buses provided relief for those held in the crowded stadium.

A few years ago stealth bombers left their safe havens of the central US for a mission in Iraq. It would mark the beginning of an air assault and ground war that would last for several years. In the bays of this airship were enough explosives to destroy millions of dollars worth of facilities. It was clear to all involved; Baghdad would never be the same. Loyal and brave soldiers fulfilled their duty to the president of the United States and her citizens as they choked back the continuing reality of destruction and death that would result from their mission. They had pledged a loyalty to the US to conduct such operations in order to protect the freedoms we all hold dear. The President, who is commander in Chief, had ordered the attack to protect the security interests of the US. These brave aviators knew of the devastation their mission would bring. They were also well aware that there are many people in the world who desire to kill and destroy the United States. In their hearts surely was a sense of national pride and duty overcoming any sense of sorrow for the victims of their attack.

As I said, all illustrations fall short of what John must have felt as he saw these angels in their final preparations for the mission given by the Lord. Final victory is soon at hand and vindication for the martyrs in the faith. Many of John's closest friends had been killed at the hands of the Romans because of their faith. His audience was facing great persecution. The final victory is almost here.