

Revelation 7:9-17. The Palm-Bearing Vision



This is the continuation of [The Last Prophecy: An Abridgment of Elliott's Horae Apocalypticae.](#)

The Final Salvation Of The Elect. The Doctrines Of Augustine. Fourth Century.

[9] After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands;

[10] And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.

[11] And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God,

[12] Saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.

[13] ¶ And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?

[14] And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

[15] Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them.

[16] They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat.

[17] For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. (Rev 7:9-17)

WE HAVE ALREADY in a great measure anticipated the main explanation of this vision; but there is one point not touched on, and which requires attention, namely, the position which the true Church held on earth as to the Apostolic character of her ministry, symbolized by that which the Evangelist himself held during the visions which he saw. It may be well to mark very particularly this latter, since it will serve as an explanation to some difficulties: and in confirmation of the view being one recognized in Scripture, we need only refer to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, for similar examples.

These ancient prophets, we may observe, prophesied not merely by word, but by action. The acts that were required of them were meant to show on a larger scale what God proposed to do. They were, in other words, types; and in this way the prophets became typical or representative persons. Take for instance the passage in Isaiah: "Behold, I and the children that God hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the Lord of hosts." (Isa. 8:18) Again, the Lord had said to Isaiah, "Go and loose the sackcloth from off thy loins, and put off thy shoe from thy foot. And he did so, walking naked and barefoot. And the Lord said, Like as my servant Isaiah hath walked naked and barefoot three years, for a sign and wonder upon Egypt and Ethiopia, so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptians and Ethiopians captives, young and old, naked and barefoot," (Isa 20:2-4) etc. When Jeremiah made yokes and wore them by the Lord's command, he is then desired to send them to the kings and peoples of Moab, Edom, Tyre, and Sidon, to cause them by this action to understand that they were to be brought under the yoke of the king of Babylon. (Jer. 27:3) When Ezekiel, by God's command, had drawn on a tile a picture of the city of Jerusalem, he is told to build a fort, and set battering-rams against it, etc., (Ezek. 4:2) a sign of the approaching destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar's besieging army. Again, when he publicly prepared his stuff by day, and digged a hole, and carried it in the twilight, etc., he is told to say to Israel, "I am your sign: like as I have done, so shall it be done unto them: they shall remove and go into captivity." (Ezek. 12:11)

Isaiah, like St. John, was rapt into vision, wherein we find him receiving a command, "Make the heart of this people fat and their ears heavy," etc. On which he puts the question, "Lord, how long?" and receives for answer, "Until the cities be wasted without inhabitants," etc. (Isa. 6:11); showing that the period of the vision extended to a time beyond the prophet's life. Again, in the vision of the dry bones we may see Ezekiel typifying to Israel the Gospel preachers of the latter day, his successors in the prophetic office. (Ezek. 36.)

In the same way St. John is to be regarded as a representative individual during his visions, a figure of the true Apostolic ministry that was to be continued in the Church on earth, and those views that he received as representing the light to be given to the Church on various points and at different times, to the end of the present dispensation.

The view which was permitted to him in the present vision was that of an elect number, who, being sealed, were to go through tribulation; and being victorious, and having in their hands palm branches as symbols of their victory (a Judaic as well as a Roman symbol), were to arrive, in white garments washed in the blood of Christ, and in countless multitudes, at the throne of God. No change had taken place in the scenery round about. There was the Roman earth; there stood the four tempest-angels holding the winds; and afterwards followed a series of events, all which tend to show that this vision of the palm-bearers was, by anticipation, a prospective glimpse into futurity, vouchsafed at this juncture to the faithful for their encouragement.

Let us examine, then, whether there was at this period any revelation made to

the true Church, or to any of its principal ministers, of this doctrine of electing and saving grace. Does it appear that anyone did observe the distinction between the professing and the real Church, and did mark it out so publicly as that it formed an era in Church history, and therefore a fit subject for prefiguration to St. John by the angel?

To Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, in the year A.D. 395, is the Church acknowledged to be so much indebted, that the time of his ministry has ever been considered as furnishing a remarkable epoch in its history. He was born near Hippo, in North Africa, A.D. 354, in the reign of Constantius. He went to Rome, and thence to Milan, A.D. 383, 385. There he heard its bishop, Ambrose, preach; he was converted and baptized. In A.D. 388 he returned to Carthage, was ordained a presbyter, and in A.D. 395 Bishop of Hippo. His life was continued for nearly thirty-five years after, till the time when the Vandal irruption into Africa took place.

His views of divine truth were peculiarly full on two points, – the same that we have considered, as being the two most strongly marked in the visions just before us: 1st, that of Christ's true Church being composed of spiritual believers alone; and 2nd, that of the origin and increase of this true Church being the work of God's sovereign grace; – of grace electing, preventing, quickening, illuminating, adopting, saving; – saving alike from sin's dominion and from all other real evils of this life, and saving too unto the end. Doubtless the manner in which he was himself called into this true Church led him to feel its value, and prepared him zealously to advocate this truth. Born of a Christian mother, and at one time anxious as a youth to be baptized, his wish was not complied with; the danger of sin after baptism, according to the error of the day, constituted an objection in the minds of his parents; so he grew up not even in profession a Christian. In his Confessions he tells us how he was led into vice and error, – error of a nature to lead him still further into vice, as it led him to disbelieve the holiness of God and the responsibility of man. It was in this state of heathenism, sensuality, hardness of heart, and philosophic pride and darkness that he visited Milan, heard the truth, and was converted. Thus previous to his baptism he experienced the truth of God's free, sovereign, and converting grace; and we find him soon afterwards preaching zealously and writing on this very subject, as well as on the spirituality of the true Church; and yet again on the doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints, which was soon added to his other views of divine truth.

A few years after he opposed the Pelagian error, which had arisen in the Church, asserting man's free will; and by his direction councils were induced solemnly to condemn the heresy, and at the same time to recognize the doctrine of grace. Further, on occasion of the capture of Rome by Alaric, A.D. 410, Christianity having been reproached by the heathens as the cause of the calamity, and the Christians being in bitterness and disappointment at their hopes of speedily-coming blessedness being frustrated, he wrote his great work called the *City of God*. It was his plan in it to draw a line between the professedly baptized and the really baptized Church, – the kingdom of this world and the kingdom or city of God. He sought to distinguish the elect, – their character, that of love to God, as distinct

from the love of self and the world; their privilege, that of being enlightened, quickened, sanctified, and saved even to the end, by the same divine grace; their state in this world, that of strangers, with tribulation and warfare here appointed them, but with the assurance of future glory. In short, it was the very tracing out historically the past and prophetically the future fortunes of the 144,000 of the Apocalypse, as distinct from those of the unsealed Israel. Indeed, he speaks of the citizens of this heavenly city as "God's twelve tribes of election out of Israel's professing tribes." He notes the number as definite, yet large in the aggregate, as a number numberless. He speaks of their being gathered out of all nations and kindreds and tribes; also of the Church's tribulation and Antichrist's persecution as by no means so short as many expected it to be. He writes too of the alone cleansing blood of Jesus as washing them from sin, and of the final victory and triumph of these redeemed in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Such were the views put forth by Augustine on the subject of divine grace; – views obtained, he says, from the Apostolic Scriptures, and under the immediate teaching of the Holy Ghost. As regards the doctrines of the election of grace and the final perseverance of the saints, it is evident that not only the sealing and vision, but also the prospective palm-bearing vision was needed; and both were revealed at corresponding epochs in the history of the Church as a prophecy to the representative of the earthly Church, St. John, and as the fulfillment of such prophecy to Augustine – to the one, previous to the great tempest blasts let loose by the four angels; to the other, previous to the irruption of the barbarian nations over the Roman world.

Augustine's views relative to baptism are interesting, and were well calculated to serve as an antidote to the errors of his day. He distinguished carefully between baptismal regeneration, and the regeneration or conversion of the heart, to which last change personal faith in Christ was deemed by him essential. He was convinced, from observing those around him, that men did not obtain spiritual life by the washing of water, and he felt from his own experience, as well as from the Scripture account of the Ethiopian eunuch and others, that spiritual life may be begun before baptism. Yet he entertained a high opinion of the benefits often conferred in baptism by the Divine Spirit, i.e., if rightly performed, and followed by faith in the person receiving it. It was thus that his doctrine of electing and preserving grace obtained a general sanction in the Church; Rome itself at one time assenting, and reckoning Augustine amongst its saints. But the contrariety of Augustine's doctrine to that system of ecclesiastical salvation begun by the priest in baptism, and carried on simply by virtue of Church ceremonies and ordinances, was too decided to remain unfelt; and Rome soon eschewed its former direct approval, and substituted a kind of mongrel system of ecclesiastical semi-Pelagianism in its room.

And so, after the barbarian irruption, a twofold stream of doctrine was perpetuated in the visible Church through the centuries following – the one, the ritualistic ecclesiastical doctrine of religion, maintaining that Church ceremonies are in themselves meritorious; the other, the Augustinian spiritual doctrine of saving grace. Thenceforth also a corresponding twofold

view prevailed respecting the Church of Christ – one party regarding it as the earthly visible Church under a vice-Christian priesthood; the other, as being the little flock, simply and alone, who are united by living faith to Christ, the living Head.

The Augustinian light, which then shone, continued to glimmer on through the dark ages down to the Reformation. Indeed we may trace Rome's opposition to it and God's blessing on it to the present day in our own English Church. Our 17th Article is an epitome of much that we have gone over in the last two lectures in point of doctrine. Speaking of the elect, it says: "They which be endued with so excellent a benefit of God (predestination to life), be called according to God's purpose, by his Spirit working in due season; they through grace obey the calling, they be justified freely, they be made sons of God by adoption, they walk religiously in good works, and at length by God's mercy they attain to everlasting felicity." In the prayer used in our burial-service there is likewise a reference to these called ones, where we are taught to pray that God would "speedily accomplish the number of his elect, and hasten his kingdom."

Milner in his *Church History* gives a testimony to Augustine's usefulness very similar to that already adduced. He says, "It is evident that real Christianity, notwithstanding its nominal increase under the emperors, must soon have been extinct, if God had not interposed with a second great effusion of his Spirit. This involves the private life of Augustine. The effects of this effusion were solid, though never brilliant. The light from Augustine's writings never broke out into a vivid flame, but shone with a moderate brightness at first, and afterwards through many ages, even down to the Reformation."

Why Rome ever tolerated or titled Augustine has excited surprise. It may have been because he was an opposer of the Pelagian doctrine of free-will, an error in its essence opposed to the Romish system of chaining down man's mind and conscience. Our Article (10th) On Free-will puts the doctrine in a Scriptural point of view: "We have no power of ourselves to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us that we may have a good will, and working with us when we have that good will."

It has been said by some that there are passages in the writings of Augustine which would seem to favor the errors of the times in which he lived, and since we have mentioned him in a manner so commendatory, it is but right to admit the fact. He seems to have been in some respects tinctured with the superstitions with which the age was infected. For he credulously believed in miracles being performed by relics of saints, 650. His humility and charity disposed him to be credulous. However, he distinctly disavowed any belief in the omniscience of departed saints, or that they were able to afford any aid, temporal or spiritual; and he as distinctly avowed that whosoever directed men to any other "mediator than Christ must be esteemed an Antichrist."

Continued in [Revelation 8:1-5. The Seventh Seal](#)

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