

There will be a final end

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Date: 29 March 2015

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[0 : 00] We're going to look together in the book of Revelation, in chapter 15 through chapter 16, as was read.

That's what we do on most, not all Sundays, but that's one of the basic things we do, to go through the Bible, hear what God is saying, try and understand it, and try and take it to heart, and put it to heart.

Put it into practice in our lives, in the way we live. That's what we're aiming to do, that's what all Christians should be aiming to do. And as we come to this chapter, let's ask God for help. Lord, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. So enable us today, not to die, not to shrivel up, not to forget, not to neglect, not to go off course, but to be fed, to be sustained, and to grow in Christian strength, in Christian faith, and love, and service. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. So chapter 16 is in some ways a repetition of themes that we've already come across in the book.

[1 : 31] The book repeats things and announces things which it's going to come back to, and that's what's happening. When something's repeated in the Bible, it means it's important.

The blessed Alec Mateer, who was a minister in Bristol, I think, said, Dear friends, if the Bible gets boring, listen more carefully, because what God is saying is really important.

And that's right. When it's something that you think, oh, I've heard this before, it's meaning that it's really important. And this is relating, again, to the fact that we live in a world with all sorts of things happening in it.

We live in a world of climate change. Which is a threat. And we live in a world which has beautiful sunsets, which lift our hearts.

We live in a world which has horrible diseases and plagues. The Ebola virus. HIV, AIDS. Historically, bubonic plague.

[2 : 47] I listened to Melvin Bragg's Start the Week. You can download it as a podcast on infectious diseases.

Now, looking back at the history of the diseases that have spread across the world, it was really very sobering. Anyway, that's the sort of world we live in.

But it also is a world of beauty. It has blue sky and white clouds and seashores and beaches. It's an amazing combination of remarkable beauty and awfulness.

And you think, what sort of world do we live in? I could add to that list the events of the past week with the airliner, with the pilot, who unaccountably took it upon himself to end not only his own life, but the life of his 150 passengers and crew.

You think, what sort of world do we live in? In the Argus yesterday, the Brighton newspaper, something about children being forced into prostitution and drug abuse.

[3 : 59] You can look across the world where I was in Sri Lanka, forcible conscription, murder, people doing horrible things to one another.

This is the world that we live in. Earthquakes, tsunamis. How can there be such beauty and goodness and evil and suffering and dignity and awfulness?

It's the sort of world we're in. How can it be accounted for? One of the other programmes that I like to listen to is Inside Science with Adam Rutherford, who is the presenter of that, Dr Adam Rutherford.

From time to time, you get a glimpse of where he's coming from in world events. What would he say on this Inside Science programme about beauty?

I think what he would say and what many people in our culture would say, yes, there is beauty, but we haven't got the faintest idea where it comes from. Why should we live in a beautiful world if it

has just come about by chance?

[5 : 18] And of course, Adam Rutherford is very big on evolution and very clever about it, but I think that his cleverness, if I may say so, somehow, it doesn't cross his mind to ask the question, where does beauty come from if it's all chance?

Have you ever seen anything as beautiful as our world come? You throw a few things in the air and see how they land? I don't think that produces beauty. Chance doesn't do that. And evil.

Adam Rutherford has got a moral compass. He thinks some things are good, some things are bad. So the bad things are reducing biodiversity and contributing to climate change.

Some things are evil. I think most people would say there are some things that are evil. But where does evil come from if it's just a matter of throwing things into the air and seeing how they land, if evolution is just chance?

How can you even talk about things being evil, wrong, bad? They're just what they are, aren't they? And I think there is, perhaps unconsciously, a sustained attempt to escape asking the question, how deeply is morality embedded in the universe?

[6 : 54] Good and evil. Moral things. They're there. And it's not just on the surface. It's not just chance. And when disasters happen, well, our culture will say they're awful, but they do just happen.

It's part of nature. But there's a Christian answer. And the Christian answer, I think, is considerably more satisfactory intellectually and spiritually and in every way than what this culture can offer.

And the Bible says these things point to and originate from a personal creator, a God who is so big that he can make our vast universe and to him it's just like a speck, you know.

This great God who is personal and powerful and moral. this is why the universe is as it is.

These things point to the goodness of the maker of all things and points to the dysfunctional relationship that our species has with our maker.

[8 : 25] we ought to know him and in a way we do but we retreat from that knowledge or camouflage it or exchange it for something else or get distracted and there is, the Bible says, a radical breakdown on the person-to-person relationship between humankind and the God who made humankind in a loving, wise, specific way.

It's like I'm proposing what happens if you take your computer and attack it with a fork and pour coffee on it and stick mains electricity in all the wrong places.

It goes wrong, doesn't it? And in some ways it's designed to do that. It will say error 503, reverse dongle error in subsection 003. 384, blue screen of death, all things like that.

And it will do all that to say you're not doing this right. Please don't pour coffee on me. Please don't put your mains plug into the USB port.

You're not doing this right and if you keep on doing it black smoke will come, or blue smoke and it's very difficult to reverse that. It's very difficult to put the blue smoke back in and make everything right again.

[9 : 49] So that's how that sort of system works. I'm saying this is the way our universe works. It throws up error messages. It says you're not doing things right.

Beauty and goodness come from the beautiful and good God and disaster and evil are consequences and indicators of the breakdown of our relationship with our maker. That's where the book of Revelation is coming from.

That's where the Bible's coming from. And let's look at this specifically in chapter 15 verse 5 and onwards. We're going to see horrible plagues.

That's what we're going to see. But notice first of all where it all starts. After this I looked and in heaven the temple that is the tabernacle of testimony was opened.

Tabernacle I'm not familiar with that word. It sounds like it's a medical condition isn't it? but it just means tent and it refers back to the tent that God lived in when he camped with his people in the days of Exodus and the days of Moses.

[10 : 57] It was a place of meeting with God. I looked and in heaven the temple that is the tabernacle the tent of testimony was opened. And out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues.

They were dressed in clean shining linen and wore golden sashes round their chests. One of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God who lives forever and ever.

So this sequence of the book of Revelation it's visionary it's symbolic but what it's doing is really telling us the story of this world the situation of this world in start to finish everything in a broad brush stroke in the chapter that we've looked at.

and the sequence of events in this opening bit is that we go from the temple to the living creatures to the angels to the earth and what is transmitted are these seven bowls of wrath and they come from God's glory and God's presence.

It says in verse 8 the temple was filled with the smoke from the glory of God from his power and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

[12:12] Here's an off the cuff question. Do you know another place in the Bible where the temple was filled with smoke and it obstructed what was going to go on when the temple was opened?

Yes, Solomon wanted to do stuff but it was filled with the smoke sort of indicates the presence of God and the presence of God was so strong they couldn't carry on with the order of service that they planned.

Was the same thing happen in Isaiah? I just can't think of that. I don't know whether it says it was filled with smoke but anyway that's where he's quoting from with this.

So here it is pictorially the door is opened from the temple out comes one of the four living creatures and I'm sorry if you're here for the first time you won't know what this is all referring back to but these are creatures that attend God and we're told that there's sorry I've got this wrong seven angels come out and then the four living creatures pass the bowls of wrath the seven bowls of wrath to the seven angels that the wrath were told of the God who lives forever and ever that's in verse seven and the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

so this bit tells us it introduces us yet again to the idea that when these events take place they're not accidental they're not just something that Satan is doing and God is powerless to interfere or doesn't have any idea of what's happening but rather these events originate they start off in the holy place of God.

[14:06] They start off with the glory and the power and the holiness of God. So they're not independent they're not random there is some purpose behind them.

So let's look at the first four bowls. Chapter 16 Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels go and pour the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth.

So just to repeat what I said before it is saying that the things in these bowls are now going to enter world history they're going to enter the sphere that we live in and where have they come from they've come from God in some sense there's more to it than that but this is where they've come from this is where they're heading to here's the first angel and he pours verse 2 the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshipped his image.

So there are the people worshipping the image there's the image you remember the beast can you remember why has it got a sticking plaster on it it was wounded and then it was revived again it was almost like it died and then came to life and if you remember in its original context this would very well suit the Roman emperor Nero who was reputed to die and come back again so this is the first bowl poured out on the land and the sequence is going to be land sea fresh water sky so it's going to be the whole ecosphere that humankind is interested in earth sea fresh water and sky and this sequence is the same sequence that was followed by the seven seals and certainly the seven trumpets so these four go together in that sort of way and this particular plague produces painful boils or sores now as with so much of the book of revelation it's actually quoting symbolically from somewhere else do you know another place in the bible where there was an affliction of boils or sores the place one of the plagues in exodus one of the plagues in exodus and what he's really saying is like the way god dealt with egypt he's going to deal that way with the whole world like the exodus plague it's actually plague number six in exodus interesting to note that this is targeted on the beast worshippers and just to remind you again from previous weeks that in the roman empire at this time there was a huge almost universal pressure that if you wanted to get on at all in the roman empire if you wanted to survive you had to sign up to be worshipping the emperor or worshipping the gods that they worshipped hence the idea of worshipping the beast the beast represents the kingdom or the empire referred to bowl number two the second angel poured out his bowl on the sea and it turned to blood like that of a dead man and every living thing in the sea died so this is well let's do it in order is there another place in the bible where water turns to blood yep

and this is a plague too in exodus so it's not it's not the sea in exodus but here he changes it slightly and says it's the sea like exodus plague number one in exodus actually and you might like to notice again this is drawing on the way we've gone through the book the plagues at the beginning affected a quarter of the target area then the second lot affected a third and the proportion that is referred to here is the whole thing every living thing in the sea died and you can see that as he's gone through his literary work he's reminding us that there's a forward movement because a quarter is increased to a third is increased to the whole thing so he's building up the tension and pressure as he goes through that was number two this is number three the third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water and they became blood so there's a river and there it becomes blood and this too is like plague number six and this gets commentary verse

five then I heard the angel of the waters say you are just in these judgments you who are and who were the holy one because you have so judged for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve and the point that's being emphasized here is that God's judgment is just it's fair God isn't being vindictive and arbitrary and just bad tempered and lashing out where people don't deserve it if that were the case I think we could justifiably mock such a God who loses his temper and who goes off on one as it were but the God of the

[20 : 21] Bible is not such a God and that makes him all the more to be respected and indeed feared because his judgments are absolutely just he pays back to humankind exactly as they deserve neither more nor less and that's the point of the worship here you are just in these judgments you who are and were the holy one because you have so judged and he gives a particular example the appropriateness of doing this to the fresh water you give them blood to drink because they shed the blood of your people that's a particular example of it but you can see the appropriateness of what he's saying is you shed blood and now you're giving them blood to drink it's sort of what goes around comes around in that sense what you the way you relate to God comes back to you and the altar responds verse 7 yes

Lord God almighty true and just are your judgments and it wouldn't be surprising if we're sitting and listening we might say well I have a problem with that because I don't think that I would deserve any sort of judgment like this and I don't think the world deserves any sort of judgment like this and I think what I would have to say is I understand where you're coming from but I don't think the problem is with God I think the problem is with us because if we are to understand what is just and deserved and right we need to understand how great God is if we were to despise something trifling like a piece of litter left on the pavement it's nothing that would be one thing but if we were to despise the great the majestic the

God who totally made everything and we are totally in his debt if we treat him like a piece of litter that is not right and that deserves a repayment of some sort and the repayment depends on the scale of the offence and the scale of the offence depends on the hugeness of the person that we are treating so badly see our problem is we don't realise how absolutely great God is that's why we think we don't deserve this it's actually our problem not God's he pays us back he pays these people back as they deserve here's bowl number four where have I got to verse eight the fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire seems terribly relevant in these days of when we think about climate change doesn't it there's the sun and it's able to scorch with intense heat and the reaction of these people is that they curse the name of God who had control over these plagues but they refused to repent and glorify him and I want to point out what was said in previous chapters what what is the purpose of these awful plagues and one purpose is repentance it's calling out to us error message you're not doing this right you're really doing this terribly wrongly message turn back to the God who runs the world who gives you every breath that you have turn to him that's what repent means they refused to repent and it said here despite all this they refused to repent and glorify him turn and worship

God no plague number five so these the next plagues then always a little bit different first four fairly standard on the ecosphere!

[25 : 12] the next ones always go a bit different the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast and his kingdom was plunged into darkness so the people who worship the beast there's his throne and it's plunged into darkness is there anywhere like this in the Bible?

there was another plague in Egypt was a plague of darkness did I write down which one! it was and again he's saying there was a specific target for this this is the beast and the throne of the beast

and his kingdom particularly targeted this plague and again it says at the end let me make sure I'm doing the right one it's verse 11 they blasphemed or they cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores but the one thing they didn't do was say to him am I supposed to learn something from this if I'm supposed to learn from this please would you teach me what it is I'm supposed to learn is there something that you're trying to say to me but they didn't do that they didn't do that they refused to repent of what they had done!

This is true! yeah the false prophet they are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs they go out to the kings of the whole world to gather them for the battle on the great day of God almighty there's the dragon the beast and the false prophet and from those three come these evil spirits like frogs!

that's exodus again isn't it and he's mixing and matching these ideas so these evil spirits they well they deceive don't they verse 14 they are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs they go out to the kings of the whole world to gather them for battle they sort of entice the kings to join in this battle i think it's worth considering what's happening here verse 14 they are the spirits of demons performing miraculous signs they go out to the kings of the whole world to gather them for battle on the great day of god almighty they go to the kings and say fight fight fight and to push them to draw them to this final showdown this great battle now let's look at this in detail so I give myself a little bit more space for that the idea of spirits lying giving propaganda to kings to make them fight there is actually an example of this in the bible it's where my mind went to anybody can think of an example of a fight a battle that was instigated via a spirit yeah this is in the time of

Micaiah let's see it's like 1 kings 22 interesting story this and I'm just thinking that John is probably drawing on this idea a couple of kings were deliberating whether to go to war or not and the king asks for advice from his prophets from his advisors from the people who speak wise words and they all say yes oh king you're going to be victorious go for it fight on and one other prophet is brought in whose name is Micaiah and he says you're going to lose so this is 1 kings 22 verse 16 the king said to him how many times must

[30 : 17] I make you swear to tell me nothing but truth in the name of the Lord then Micaiah answered I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd and the Lord said these people have so don't go and fight all the rest of them are saying to you fight but I say you're going to be a disaster and verse 19 is illuminating so the prophet who the real prophet says therefore hear the word of the Lord I saw the Lord sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing round him on his right and on his left and the Lord said the Lord is in his heavenly headquarters how can we get this king to go to his death because it is in my will for him to die how will this happen in the depths of my will and one suggested this and another that and finally a spirit came forward and stood before the

Lord and said I will entice him by what means the Lord asked I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets he said you will succeed in enticing him the Lord said go and do it and that's how Micaiah theologizes what had been happening in the court of that king the propaganda came from a deceiving spirit because he wasn't prepared to listen to what God says and this seems to be what's being described here the kings of the earth rather than seeing what God is doing and repenting listen to another rhetoric another line of speech instead and this line of speech whereas God is saying humble yourself turn to me ask me if there's a problem ask me if there's something that they should be doing but the other line of speech says no don't do that just keep on fighting against

God keep on pushing him out of the way keep on pushing him out of the way keep on if there's something that comes in your conscience that you think might be from God just get rid of that if there's something that you think God wants you to do do!

repent and this other spiritual force is saying no you just keep on you're on the right track you just keep on against God let's go back there is an ultimate destination of that line if you if you insist on keeping on fighting against God there is what in American English I think is called a showdown it's a phrasal verb yeah it is isn't it a showdown show up means one thing completely different showdown means a big final battle so in high noon the film look at

Lindsay for any sort of validation to this the sheriff meets the bandits the baddies and the sheriff is saying one thing and the bandits are saying something else and they say okay at twelve o'clock we will fight we will fight it out and only one of us will win so all the time they haven't you could run away you could run away you could confess you could say I'm terribly sorry but no no no and the

clock ticks on towards high noon and at high noon we have a showdown and only one person can win and this book of revelation is saying that's really the way the world history works it's ticking on going on towards this final battle this final showdown and there's one set of forces saying go to God and ask him how you can avoid this go and say can I take refuge what should I do is there any forgiveness that's one set of forces and the other forces saying fight fight fight there's a story of [35 : 02] Prabhak Haran the leader of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka which I might have mentioned before over that 30 year period there were opportunities for a negotiated settlement and in a negotiated settlement between the two ethnic groups in Sri Lanka it could have been that the Tamil Tiger group actually won a considerable number of concessions but as it is they didn't because Prabhak Haran the leader wouldn't accept a negotiated settlement and there were his captains and commanders and perhaps his own selves saying fight fight fight and of course his excellency the president was also saying I'm not going to negotiate either fight fight fight and it came to a terrible showdown and the Tamil Tiger cause was completely obliterated the whole saying is that there is this fight fight fight and if someone is saying that to you about

God fight fight please don't listen God is saying no turn negotiated settlement put down your arms wave a white flag we can sort this out and you will be far better off far better off you can't win if you fight me plague number six plague number seven is the end of all things and here in a few sentences seem to combine all the worst things to show the end of everything so from the throne comes this final bowl of wrath and a loud voice which says I thought it said it is finished like Jesus said from the cross but it's a different word it means it's happened what has been spoken about has actually happened it is done and then there came all these signs of

God at work flashes of lightning rumblings peals of thunder and a severe earthquake no earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on the earth so tremendous was its quake and the great city splits into three parts and the cities of the nations collapsed God remembered Babylon the great and gave her the wine of the fury of his wrath that's the cup you remember we talked about that last week the cup filled with the wrath of God and that cup is given to this city and the whole system of humankind without God to drink this cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath!

do do you think God ever gets angry if you're thinking no he never does I think that sentence is a big problem isn't it because twice it says the wine of the fury of his wrath God is a great God and that means that sin is not something he brushes under the carpet but he is really angry about it and as I said the other week there is a way for us not to drink that cup because Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane was faced with the same cup and in some ways he could have refused anything to do with it but as he prayed he said I will drink that cup I will drink that cup of wrath so that for my people there is not a single drop of that cup left why don't you turn to

Jesus Christ now so that you don't have to drink that cup yourself but that you can embrace the fact that he drank it for you I'm sorry to be dealing with such well it's my job isn't it I'm dealing with serious things that's what I'm here to do but it is serious and there we the Babylon the city is given that cup to drink and every island flees away and the mountains could not be found and huge hailstones fall down hailstones exodus plague again isn't it and did people say sorry give up now I got it wrong got it wrong please at this very last minute just before the chapter ends could I be forgiven do they say that no they curse

[40 : 16] God on account of the plague of hail because the plague was so terrible they blaspheme God they're such serious things aren't they please don't think that I'm taking delight in going all through these plagues and stuff like that it gives me no pleasure to think about things like this but I would not be true to the Bible if I didn't tell you what it said this is what it says I don't say it with delight I almost say it with tears really and in in the middle of this sequence of terrible judgment there is a blessing click verse 15 here's the words of Jesus coming through this catalogue of awfulness Jesus says I'm coming and I'm coming like a thief interesting it shows us that you can't push analogies in the

Bible beyond what they're meant to cope with are they you shouldn't say if Jesus is like a thief he obviously is carrying weapons of breaking into houses and things like that what he's meaning to say is I come when you're not expecting it I come as a complete surprise well of course he's telling us so it shouldn't be a complete surprise that's what he's doing he's saying don't be taken by surprise don't think that it'll never happen so easy for us isn't it the world carries on as normal and we think this is just make believe it's so unlike our current experience and Jesus says no please it's the nature of it that I will turn up as a surprise please be ready blessed and he's got this is blessing

number three actually out of seven blessed is he who is on watch or stays awake and keeps his clothes with him so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed in other words be ready and dressed for my coming so just trying to think of analogies for this so at the church weekend away next weekend the weekend after suppose there's a fire alarm in the middle of the night so I've been on a conference where there's a fire alarm in the middle of the night and everybody piles out of course they have to do that and an astounding array of night wear astounding and if they had known

I think they would have said oh I should do my hair I don't want people to see me like this or I should make sure I've got some clean pyjamas on or a nice dressing gown instead of the tatty one that I bought you would have been ready prepared and Jesus is saying when I come it'll be a little bit like that unexpected fire alarm make sure you've got the right stuff sure that you're not taken by surprise make sure that you wouldn't feel ashamed on that day actually it says blessed is the worst person who stays awake I'm not going to advocate that at the weekend away just in case there's a fire alarm keep your clothes on stay awake all night because that would spoil the fun but you see what is being said here don't get to the point where you think this is so unlike anything I'm just going to give up on the idea

I'll just carry I'll live like everybody else lives I won't set my hope on Jesus coming I won't put everything in the context of the end of the world I'll just live for today like everybody else does he says don't do that I'm coming behold I'm coming like a thief and blessed is the person who's ready on the ball ready at that moment for some it will be the unwelcome culmination of the fight they have been spoiling for all their lives for some people who've listened to fight fight fight they will have been heading towards the saying yeah I'll take God on because I've not listened to a thing he said all the way through my life and I'm going to follow that through to the end and it will be a bitter end it will be a bitter end and what God is saying is negotiated settlement now now is the time for a negotiated settlement come now let us reason together though your sins be red like crimson they can be white as snow let's talk about it now but for others it will be the fulfillment of their best dreams the things that you thought were so good that you could hardly dare to think about them will all be fulfilled so don't stop dreaming those dreams stay ready for the dawning of the most wonderful day that this world has ever seen the day of blessing when the king who sits on his throne says to you and me to the believers come you who are blessed by my father take your inheritance the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world what a great day that will be and it is enter thou into the joy of thy lord on that plaque from all those years ago same hope let's close by singing together