

Revelation 15

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Preacher: David Helm

[0 : 00] Three years through fifth grade are now dismissed for teen tots and teen kids. Today's scripture reading is from Revelation chapter 15 verses 1 through 8, which can be found in the Blue Bibles on page 1036.

It's Revelation chapter 15 verses 1 through 8. Please stand for the reading of God's word. Amen. Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished.

And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire, and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.

And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God Almighty.

Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations. Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy.

[1 : 27] All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed. After this, I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened.

And out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure bright linen with golden sashes around their chests.

And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls, full of the wrath of God, who lives forever and ever.

And the sanctuary was filled with the smoke from the glory of God and from his power. And no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated. Well, the book of Revelation has been known to put readers in a tough way.

[2 : 41] It's a difficult genre to understand. So unfamiliar. A series of expositions from the book of Revelation, the length of which we've been carrying on in this congregation, can be taxing upon listeners too.

Probably at least more than one of you here today might be a bit discouraged in the Revelation text, particularly in regard to what you might have heard in the reading for today, verses 1 especially, verses 5-8.

The bookends of the text. We've been lumbering our way through Revelation this year. And when we come to 15.1, he sees another sign, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues.

And then, verses 5-8, in amplification of that tent of witness, all with the wilderness imagery of the tabernacle, the Holy of Holies opening up, and seven angels clothed, given seven bowls of wrath, which unfolds seven judgments, cascading upon the earth, to its end.

And you have stood, and you have heard, and you now sit, and you wonder, silently of course, because you're in church, oh my, we are on the threshold of another sequence of seven judgments that are coming forth from the throne room of heaven.

[4 : 36] again? How many series of seven are we to bear up under? And in one sense, that's true.

We are introduced here to what are, in verse 1's words, the last of these series of seven judgments.

I don't think it's last in the sense that it, chronologically, is the final end where the others weren't, but last in the sense of the last sequence of sevens, which together have, like rolling waves, unfolded the judgments of God to the end.

I wanted you to know that this sequence of sevens, if you haven't known it by now, is a literary, structural marker for the writer.

seven seals, the judgments of God, that gave way to the seven trumpets, the judgments of God, which gave way to this sequence that we are closing today, that I have likened to seven consecutive dreams, which unfold the judgments of God.

[6 : 00] And now, interlocking the last dream of verses 2 to 4, we have already, by way of parenthesis, been pulled forward to where we will be going next week, seven bowls, which unfold the judgments of God.

And so today, when the text is announced and the passage is read, undoubtedly, there must be some among us who say, how many cycles does John want us to sit through?

And why? What purpose does this repetitive literary style serve? He could have shortened his letter by at least three sequences of these, and indeed, perhaps more people would have read his book.

But he didn't. I want to suggest to you today, by way of a partial answer, because this question has been rumbling around in my mind as well, what is it with this literary structural marker in John?

Why, why repeating these sequences like he has? I want to do it by way of personal illustration. because I think it might encourage you.

[7 : 27] When I was a young boy, I always treasured the times when my grandpa and grandma Morkin would come to visit, parents on my mother's side.

My grandmother was a special person and a spectacular storyteller, mother. And I literally would long for the day of her arrival knowing that at the close of the evening we'd be asked to go get on our pajamas and we'd all congregate in one of the kids' rooms.

Remember, I'm one of seven. And we'd get down on the floor or on the beds and she'd come in and sit down right there with us. We'd say, Grandma, tell us a story.

She'd say, Oh, well, let's see. She'd get this twinkle in her eye. Did I tell you the, do you remember the time where I was rescued as an infant?

The year was 1910. My parents lived in Rifle, Colorado. It was cabin-like. I was just learning to crawl.

[8 : 44] Months old, really? 10, 11 months old at the most. And I had scooted out the door and was crawling down the path and an eagle came from high overhead and began to circle.

My older brother, Bryant, was outside at the time. No one knew that I was there and the eagle began to circle and swoop and descend.

And Bryant was convinced the eagle was going to come down with its talons and pluck me right off the ground. What a meal I would have made.

And Bryant came running and screaming. The eagle flew away. that's the day I was saved from the destruction of the eagle.

Tell it again, grandma. Tell it again. No. No, but I'll tell you another one like it. There was a day we were in the jungles of Sumatra and your grandfather was off ministering the gospel and I was alone.

[10 : 05] And the homes were built above the ground so that the panthers couldn't get to you at night. Oh my, I got to break out of that before we get any longer.

That was my grandma and she would go on and on and on with stories that gave us the sense of security and rescue.

Stories that told us, real life stories that told us that evil does not win in the end. Something like that's going on in the literary structure of Revelation.

These smallish communities of faith, these seven churches which we were introduced to at the beginning and this letter began to run in a circular way through those congregations.

These communities of faith that were not quite ready for the isolation that long night brings. families. The aged storyteller John unfolds his revelation in such a way as to encourage them in ways that fend off the evil of the night, that show them that the evil side will not win, that the beleaguered band, although persecuted, is rescued, although under duress, is delivered, although living under the strain of economic deprivation for their faith, shall nevertheless one day inherit all the earth and what it has to give.

[11 : 54] Listening to the stories after story after story would bring comfort and safety and a belief that God sees them, that God knows them, that God will deliver them, even them.

in ways that will be for their good. Not the same story over and over again, but stories with a similar theme that amplify the great story in different ways, and such is our understanding when we read the book of Revelation.

our disconnect with it is perhaps then due to our own circumstances. Maybe perhaps we're far too comfortably positioned in the world to know much of persecution.

Perhaps we're much too protected to understand the need for these cycles of deliverance. too much at home at the table of the world to understand the hunger for heaven.

Perhaps. I've thought about all the problems besetting the church in a general way and wondered if apocalyptic literature might be a great anecdote for the hour.

[13 : 34] We're consumed with the present. It puts forward an exalted picture of Christ at the end. We're fighting and scratching and clawing for today.

These congregations are living today in light of that day. We're so easily compromised in our strength for Christ.

Yet with so little push against us. Weak we are perhaps. Frail. Disconnected. But today we maybe have some understanding of the literary structure of Revelation.

That the story be told again. And again. Because the night falling upon these early congregations was so severe.

Today we finish the seventh what I call dream. Of course the seven bowls will follow. In the dream we see three things today.

[14 : 50] The sea, the saints, and the song. And I hope that as you wash back over this story, you will be encouraged to live gloriously in this day.

The sea, chapter 15 verse 2, and I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire.

What are we to make of the sea? For a long time, I had a romanticized understanding of the sea in Revelation. The first time we saw it, you might want to look back, is in Revelation 4, chapter 6, Revelation 4, verse 6.

Remember that chapter was this magnificent unfolding of standing a door open in heaven, and John being invited to come up and to be shown things, and then he sees one seated on a throne, verse 2, and his appearance is of jasper and other costly stones, and there's a throne and a rainbow, and around the throne, 24 thrones, and seated on those thrones, 24 elders, clothed in white, golden crowns, upon their heads, and from the throne, flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, before the throne, seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and here it is, verse 6, before the throne, there was a sea of glass, like crystal, almost exactly the wording of our own text, and I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass, mingled with fire, for a time,

I had this idealized vision of before the throne, kind of like the Lincoln Mall in D.C., there are these steps, and it's great, and it's grand, and beyond it is this like looking pool, mirroring the sky above the monuments beyond, peaceful, restful, wonderful, glorious, almost like a child by the sea in the summer.

[17 : 23] Yet, troubling this idea of the sea being this kind of thing in Revelation 15 is what we hear in 21.1.

Revelation 21.1, Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

This great sea is gone when the great human struggle for salvation and judgment is won.

The sea is gone by the end. And in addition, nearer to our text in Revelation 15, we saw the sea as a place where the terrifying beast emerged from.

Chapter 13.1, take a look. And I saw a beast rising out of the sea. And we see that that beast was like a leopard, verse 2, feet like a bear, mouth like a lion, and to it the dragon gave his power and his throne.

[18 : 37] sea. The sea became a place where this composite like figure came to oppress the world from God's truth, righteousness, and judgment.

And that beast in 13.1 is rooted in Daniel's vision in chapter 7. Take a look back in Daniel, chapter 7, this incredible apocalyptic vision given to him about what would happen after his own day and where he sees, if I can find it.

In chapter 7, verse 2, Daniel declared, I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea, and four beasts came out of the sea different from one another, and look at the relationship between these four beasts and the way they are presented as a composite beast in Revelation 13.

The first was like a lion, the second a beast like a bear, the third like a leopard, the fourth terrifying, dreadful, exceedingly strong.

You see, the idea back in our own text then in regard to what he sees is not some romanticized beach that you want to get to within a week's time because it's cold and you're tired.

[20 : 17] The sea of glass in Revelation is the place of chaos, where earthly kingdoms arise in contradiction conviction to God's rule.

In fact, in each of those occasions in Revelation 13 and in Daniel 7, it is spoken of in both places as the sea at one point, 13.1, but that same thing is reiterated as the earth itself, 13.11.

Or Daniel 7, verse 2, that which is a sea, these kingdoms come out of the earth, Daniel 7.15. And so the sea which he has before him represents the chaotic, ungodly forces that do not submit to his will, the kingdoms that arise, that run through history.

It's the place indeed in the Old Testament that speaks of Leviathan. It's why indeed in Genesis chapter 1, God separates waters and he brings order from chaos.

This is what John saw. This sea then represents all the ungodly forces that don't bend their will to the Christ.

[21 : 48] So, Revelation chapter 15. verse 2, I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass and notice, mingled with fire.

What does that mean? Well, the word for fire in Revelation is used no fewer than 23 times and every time it's a metaphor for divine judgment.

So what he sees is that the kingdoms of the earth have all been judged. They've been judged.

That's what John looks at. Fire has come. Judgment. So what he says to his early churches that are wondering, when do we get out from under the oppression of a life that is always being lived contrary to the convictions of my heart in Christ, John says, and I saw a sea of glass mingled with fire.

God's judgment will come upon it. And not only is the sea there, but look at the saints. 15-2, that's not all he saw. And also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.

[23 : 13] This is a stunning image of the band of followers who belong to the Lord, who almost look like they're seated alongside that hostile water's edge, now calmed and judged.

This reminds me of a summer camp as a kid. When you go down to the lake's edge and the bonfire goes up and somebody brings their acoustic guitar, right?

instrument in hand, ready to sing.

John sees then a time when the earth will be judged and the saints, look, those who conquered the beast are there with instruments in hand, ready to sing.

I was thinking this week of the musician, the arranger, Gordon Jenkins, great arranger for stringed instruments, kind of through the 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s in our own country.

[24 : 28] He arranged with kind of this full string sound. sound. And Jenkins has one piece that's entitled Seven Dreams.

It won't mean anything to you, but it came to my mind when I noticed that now we find ourselves beside the sea and the stringed instruments are in hand and it's the seventh dream in the sequence.

Jenkins' sound begins to fill the room. Ready for Sinatra to come in underneath it. You're too young.

Most of you are too young. That was a joke. I'm trying hard to keep you in it. The saints here are ready.

They are those who have conquered. They are the ones who have been delivered from the fire. Indeed, look at chapter 17 and verse 15. A stunning image again where we see the nature of the waters, the sea that we have spoken of.

[25 : 31] The angel said to me, the waters that you saw where the prostitute is seated are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.

At the waters, the sea itself, almost instead of waves foaming, you see people rising through the centuries, all the nations, all the earth, who did not understand or give their life to God and His way and His word.

And these saints are those who have been rescued from that. And they're seated down beside that. They've been pulled from the waters that would carry them to the abyss, where there would be separation from God forevermore.

And they're now, with that tumultuous scene, now calmed in front of them, arriving with instruments, ready for a bonfire of a different sort, where they can sing songs to the praise of God.

These are the ones who have conquered. These are battle-scarred men and women. These are men and women who once were in that froth and foam, who lived out their lives in this ungodly world, who lived faithfully and fruitfully for Him.

[26 : 53] And there will be a day when they will be carried off those waters and set upon the shore and handed an instrument and ready to fill the room with full sounds.

The irony, of course, is the way they are conquerors. How does anyone conquer in Revelation? It reminds me back in chapter 4, verse 5, that great image of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Excuse me, let's look at chapter 5 in verse 5. And one of the elders said to me, Weep no more. Behold, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered so that he can open up the scroll.

And who is the one who conquers verse 6, between the throne, I saw a lamb as though it had been slain. And who among these early churches is listed as conquering in a likewise fashion?

The church in Smyrna has been told in chapter 2, Do not fear, you are about to suffer, be faithful unto death, he will give you the crown of life.

[28 : 14] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches, the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. The conquering one was the one who willingly submitted his life faithfully, fully, fruitfully to the Lord, even though he had to endure persecution, even though he may or she may have been martyred for their faith.

That's the way you win in this world as a follower of the Lamb. And perhaps a reason why we in the West have so little understanding or need for the story to be told again.

The sea is there, the saints who have been rescued are there, and the song that is sung emerges in verses 3 and 4.

It's given a title, verse 3. They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb. I take those to be one song under two names.

They sing the song of Moses, which is nothing other than the song of the Lamb. The imagery evoked by that phrase, the song of Moses, is astounding because now you as a reader, are drawn back to the account in Exodus where God led his people up to the Red Sea.

[29 : 49] They were hemmed in on either side, not knowing how God would secure his own promise to deliver them. And God protects them in the midst of their struggles, and the sea opens up before them, and they walk through the chaotic waters on dry land, and they emerge on the other side.

And if you've ever seen Charlton Heston, you see him on the back side, high upon the rock, and the waters then cascading upon the enemies of the Lord.

And they are delivered, and Miriam takes up her song. The Lord has triumphed. He's victorious.

The horse and rider he's thrown into the sea. sea. And so what John has done is he's bundled all of this in three simple phrases. I saw a sea, a time when God's judgment fell upon the world.

I saw the saints instruments in hand. And it's the song of Moses filled with the imagery of God's people who were protected even though they themselves in their heart of hearts would never have followed God were it not been for God rescuing them.

[31 : 04] this is the song then that they begin to sing that the Lord has triumphed marvelously. This other allusion here in verse 4 the content of the song comes from Deuteronomy 32 great and just and true are your ways the song of the Lamb the one who is truly just and they're all melded together the songs that used to go to Yahweh alone are now attached to the Lord himself the Lamb and so Jesus receives the praise of the people a praise which belongs to God alone God saves how through Jesus we sing great and just and true are your ways I do not know how you have pulled me to a place in my life no matter what my age where I have begun to submit my life to Christ and follow him I don't know how it happened when everyone around me seems to be frothing at the mouth with ungodliness willing to go anywhere without moorings or anchor or direction or sail and somehow somehow someone shared with me the message of Jesus and in some measure

I believe it and I believe that there will be a day when all ungodliness will be judged by he who is just and all his saints will be saved and they will sing forever more songs of praises songs of praises I I I will ever sing to thee how is this so the great abundant mercy of God and the lamb those of us who were fearful fragile frightened by the cascading events that were overtaking our own lives the destruction that we actually saw ourselves imbibing in have somehow been cut free and pulled aboard and set set sealed by the spirit to be his son his daughter there is nothing greater that can happen to you in all your life through all your accomplishments in all your giftedness that you would have the seal of the living God and be delivered from the mark of flailing through life wondering how you can make a name for yourself and so the saints gather and they sing their song they sing their song to the

Lord and I close with this do you know the language of heaven Robert Coleman wrote a book called The Master Plan of Evangelism He used to ask that question to a friend of mine Lyle Dorset who's a professor of history he'd say Lyle do you know the language of heaven and Lyle would say what I mean do I know Greek do I know Hebrew am I studying Aramaic what do you mean do I know the language of heaven what language is God speaking he says no I'm not talking about your Greek I'm not talking about your Hebrew I'm not talking about linguistics!

do you know the language of heaven what's the language of heaven are you able to rise with the redeemed in revelation can you sing their songs great and amazing are your deeds oh Lord God the almighty just and true are your ways oh king of the nations who will not fear oh Lord and glorify your name for you alone are holy are you able to sing that song do you know the language of heaven there is not a Christian who does not at some point understand whether you were born tone deaf and you sing as poorly as some of the elders around me I won't mention them by name but there is not one among them even though they can't carry a note that does not love the voice of the congregation when it rises with the redeemed in revelation and holds forth before

God through faith the glories of his name and his salvation for their soul make a joyful noise or at least make a noise joyfully but all Christians do that I would love to see the hallmark of this church when I am old and about to die be filled with the strength of congregational singing wherein our voices are lifted in an uninhibited way because our souls are so gripped with the salvation that he has wrought for us the sign of a healthy church is a singing church do you know the language of heaven the seas!

[37 : 03] of ungodliness will one day subside the saints shall be gathered at the riverside salvation having been won and the song of celebration begun tell it again grandma tell it again i need to know that again no but i'll tell you another one like it let's pray our heavenly father we need this book we thank you for its literary structure we are reminded again of the great work you have done lead us for your name sake amen let us to do have to do!

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