

SUMMER 1 - Glimpses of Glory

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[0 : 00] Almighty God, we thank you that you have revealed yourself to us and spoken to us through your Son and through the word which we're studying tonight.

We pray that your Spirit will apply it in our lives for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. And amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. or overlapping or the same events.

[2 : 04] One of the clues to the symbolism of the book of Revelation is in one sense very obvious, but in another escapes the attention of many people who are fairly perhaps extreme today.

That is, the Old Testament. All the New Testament presupposes to some extent or another the Old Testament. So when we're trying to unpack some of the symbols, the imagery and even the sentences that are in the book of Revelation, as well as elsewhere in the New Testament, the Old Testament is the first place to turn to.

I hope you'll see some of that in evidence tonight. Another thing about the background of the book. It's not a book that just floated down from the sky, but it's a book that began in the first century AD, in the years, decades following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We're not sure exactly when it was written or when the visions were given to St. John. Probably either in the 60s AD or the 90s AD because the circumstances of the book is a persecution of the Christian church.

That's very clear. And we know that in the 60s under Nero, in the 90s as well, there were major persecutions of the Christian church. So they're the most likely dates. Remember, therefore, that the original recipients of the book to whom the book was written are facing a particular historical persecution.

[3 : 25] And therefore, the words of the book speak firstly to them. Very often, it seems to me, that modern misinterpreters of the book of Revelation forget that it had an origin with Roman persecution.

And so when people try and find Hitler here or Mussolini there or the Moscow there, it seems to me that they've sort of jumped, or not even jumped, they've just skirted over the top of the book without seeing its historical original anchor.

We also need to remember, as I passed over, that the book is not strictly chronological. We find in the book various things get destroyed from time to time, but then in later scenes or visions, those things are back again.

That ought not to trouble us. What we're getting, as I say, are a series of visions or cameos or glimpses of things, but they're not strictly chronological or even perhaps literal about what's going to happen in an ordered sequence.

As I said, the book is a series of visions. Last summer we dealt with some of those from chapters 4 to 14, the first three main visions. And this summer we're going to deal each of the four weeks, two chapters a week, with each of a vision.

[4 : 40] So tonight, 15 and 16 hang together. Next week, 17 and 18, and so on. The visions began with perhaps part of the best-known part of the book of Revelation in chapters 4 and 5, a vision of heaven, a vision of the worship of God in heaven, and all creation bowing down before the throne of God, and then the cry of who's going to open the scroll and the lamb who's found able to open that scroll.

And it's when the lamb opens the scroll, at the end of chapter 5, that all the next sequences of visions begin. So we need to remember that what we're reading tonight and in subsequent weeks all depends upon the lamb opening the scroll in heaven.

He is the one who instigates all the action that follows. That is, everything, in a sense, comes under his instigation or direction or control. Therefore, that lamb, of course, is Jesus.

The whole of the book of Revelation turns on Jesus. He is its key. And any interpretation of the book that doesn't see Jesus as central fails to understand the book of Revelation.

It also reminds us, because it's not just Jesus the person, but the lamb who was slain, who is worthy to open the scroll. That's why he's worthy, because he died. Not because he was perfect, but because he died.

[6 : 01] It is Jesus' death in particular that is the key or the heart of the book and of history. One of the themes throughout the book as well, remember it's written to people who are being persecuted, is that it is about quiet perseverance and faith in the midst of persecution.

There is a lot of cosmic upheaval, turmoil, distress, strife, destruction, judgment, catastrophe, calamity, and so on in the book.

But throughout it all, the people of God are safe and are called to endure with a quiet, steadfast faith in Christ. We'll see that tonight.

I think we'll see it every week. But it's worth bearing that in mind, because it's easy to read the book and feel afraid of the events that are described. But for Christian people who remain steadfast in their faith in Christ, we have nothing to fear.

God is sovereign. He keeps his people safe forever. And God ultimately, even though in this world it looks as though God's purposes are thwarted, God ultimately is vindicated.

[7 : 16] Where are we in the book? There's a little overhead here just to remind you. I showed this last year. It's a bit faint. I apologize for that. So I guess those at the back may not be able to see the little writing.

But the purpose of the diagram is that it shows that one series gives way to another. It's not as though you have one series finished and then another. But one series gets to the end, but the end of one series is the beginning of another.

That's why you've got sort of diagonal lines. So you get seven letters written in the first three chapters. That it gives way to seven seals in chapters six and so on. That gives way to seven trumpets in chapters eight and nine.

That gives way to seven beasts in chapters 12 to 14. And then moving on to where we are tonight in chapters 15 and 16, we have seven plagues or seven bowls. And then that gives way to various visions and the final picture of heaven.

In between various of these things, there are little interludes. So sometimes you lose track of the sequence. You often have six, and then before the last, you have a little interlude. If you remember back to chapter eight, there was silence in heaven for half an hour before the seventh trumpet sounded.

[8 : 23] And what we find tonight, thanks Joanne, what we find tonight is another series of seven, seven bowls or seven plagues. But in a sense, what's happening there is that it's arising out of the series that have gone before.

It's sort of a bit like a piece of music that never quite gets to an end. You know, it sounds what you think is going to be the last note, but the last note actually leads into another segment of music. And that carries on for a while.

And then when you get to what you think is going to be the last note of music, another sequence of music begins from that last note. That's a bit like what's happening in Revelation. Well, that's by way of preamble and to help reorient you or orient you to the book and where we are.

What I do in these talks is really just work through verse by verse roughly through the passages we're looking at and tonight chapters 15 and 16. In a sense, chapter 15 is setting the scene for what happens in 16.

John sees in heaven third time that he has, not the third time, sorry, more than that, another time when he sees a picture of heaven, a new scene is beginning. And he saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign.

[9 : 34] He's already seen various signs. This is another one. Seven angels with the seven last plagues. Last, because with them God's wrath is completed.

We've already seen earlier in Revelation all sorts of signs and instruments of God's judgment and wrath. But that was all preliminary. This now is the final judgment, the final wrath of God on the world.

So what we're reading now in this scene, 15 and 16, is a picture of the end of the world. And it's a bit scary. But before we quite get to the first angel or the first plague with a bowl, we get a little preparation now in verses 2 to 8.

John saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and standing beside the sea those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name.

They held harps given them by God. The sea of glass we've already seen earlier in the book. It's part of heaven. It's part of the peaceful picture of heaven as well.

[10:45] This sea, we'll see in a few minutes, has the people of God safe by it. Many suggest that it's a bit like the Red Sea but a heavenly Red Sea. Because one of the things in these two chapters in particular is that the exodus of Israel from Egypt by Moses and crossing the Red Sea is a significant background for what's going on here.

So the picture of the sea mixed with fire is probably a reminder to Christian people that they have been saved through, in a sense, the equivalent of a Red Sea for the people of the Old Testament. And we'll see in a minute the plagues that are coming in these bowls are a bit like the plagues of the Old Testament as well. Here it's mixed with fire. I think that that's probably just because it's dazzling and stunning rather than anything to do with judgment though it may indeed be a sea of judgment for those who are not Christians.

And the beside the sea are those who've been victorious over three things. A beast, the image of the beast and the number of the beast. All three of those things came in the preceding chapters which we looked at last year.

The beast resembles in some way the emperor of Rome who was not just an emperor in the sense of a king but also claimed a divine worship or divine right.

[12:04] The images of the beast or the emperor is probably the number of statues around and perhaps the number which we saw in chapter 13 is 666 is a suggestion that the emperor claimed some sort of divinity or claim on God but the number 666 demonstrates that he's under God.

He fails to reach the perfection of God. So beside this sea are those who've been victorious those who've resisted false worship those who are Christian people they're beside the sea and they're safe with God.

They are those who've held fast to Christ in the midst of persecution. Being safe in Revelation is never living an easy life. Being safe or victorious or making the end is never a person who's lived an easy complacent comfortable Christian life.

It is always safety in the midst of distress or judgment or temptation or persecution. There's nothing about easy Christian living in those who make it to the end.

I think it's hard for us to quite identify with John's initial authorship because our Christian lives are so easy by comparison with those facing even death by persecution of the Romans and the Roman Emperor.

[13:20] And the harps are a symbol or statement of peaceful restful victorious music often used in the Old Testament Psalms. But even more importantly is what these people, these Christian people beside this sea sing.

They sang the song of Moses which might surprise us at first. Why sing a song of Moses? Why not sing something out of the Anglican hymn book? They sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb.

Could be two songs possibly though it's one song. One song afterwards indeed follows at the rest of the verse and into verse 4. What I think this is doing is something quite important.

The verse and the song are combining or bringing together Old and New Testaments. The song of Moses was the song that the Israelites sang when they crossed the Red Sea and landed safe on the other side.

They were pursued by Pharaoh's army but if you remember back in the book of Exodus Pharaoh's army was covered over by the waters of the Red Sea after the Israelites had got through safely and on the other side the Israelites sang the song of Moses a song of victory at God or God's victory at defeating the armies of Pharaoh and bringing God's people safe to the other side.

[14:41] Perhaps I would remind you of some of those words because they're words that are alluded to throughout this chapter. The Israelites sang I will sing to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and my might and he has become my salvation. This is my God and I will praise him. My father's God and I will exalt him. The Lord is a warrior.

The Lord is his name. Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea. His picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them. They went down into the depths like a stone. Your right hand O Lord glorious in power. Your right hand O Lord shattered the enemy. Who is like you O Lord among the gods? Who is like you majestic in holiness awesome in splendor doing wonders?

That's from Exodus 15. I read it because it's background to the chapter that we're looking at tonight. You see the Israelites sang of their deliverance, their rescue, their salvation by God from the Red Sea.

[15:48] And so in a similar way do Christian people here in this picture of Revelation sing of God's salvation for them. But theirs is also a song of the Lamb. The Lamb being Jesus who has brought them eternal salvation.

It's interesting that the New Testament often uses the Exodus where Israel was brought out of Egypt, slavery there under Moses through the Red Sea into the promised land as a model for what Jesus does for his followers.

Jesus who rescues us not from Egypt but from slavery to sin through his death on the cross and bringing us to heaven to the promised eternal land. So these people here, these Christians are singing the song of Moses and the Lamb because they see that there's one salvation event in the end that the Old Testament people of God ultimately were also saved through Jesus.

And what God had done for them through Moses was a foreshadowing of what he was going to do through Jesus Christ about 1400 years later. And given all that God has done for them, no wonder they sing.

And this is what they sing. Great and marvellous are your deeds Lord God almighty. Just and true are your ways King of the ages. Who will not fear you O Lord and bring glory to your name?

[17:03] Resonating with Exodus chapter 15 that I've just read. For you alone are holy. all nations will come and worship before you for your righteous acts have been revealed.

Notice that they sing only of God, not themselves. They sing of what God has done, not what they have done. It's full of allusions both to Exodus 15, to many of the Psalms, to Amos, Deuteronomy, Malachi.

The whole of that song resonates with the Old Testament. Reminds us again that if we're going to understand the book of Revelation, we need to understand our Old Testaments well. God in here is the Lord God almighty, stressing his sovereign power.

Important really, the way you address God. Because in the midst of persecution where it looks as though the Romans have got all power, Christians can sing Lord God almighty, knowing that God has all power.

It may not quite look like that in the middle of the 60s or 90s AD, but it's true. God is sovereign. He has sovereign power. We may think the term Lord God almighty is fairly common.

[18:14] It occurs ten times in the New Testament, and nine of them are in the book of Revelation. Because it's so important to remind Christians that God is sovereign in the world in which he doesn't look sovereign.

God alone is holy as well, that song says. Holiness is one of those difficult things to quite grasp. The holiness of God means at one level he's unapproachable because he's so perfect and people aren't.

But his holiness is also to do with his justice and righteousness, that he acts rightly, and that includes salvation for God's people. So that's what God's people here are singing about.

Christians who, it seems, know their Old Testaments, putting together a song, singing of the salvation which God has brought them through Jesus, foreshadowed by what he'd done for them hundreds of years before through Moses in the Old Testament.

Now all of that is a preface to the judgment that's going to be seen in chapter 16 with the bowls and plagues. But notice the point that it makes at the beginning. We understand the judgment from the point of view of safety by the sea of the lake.

[19:23] Christian people are safe from the judgment that's coming on the world. It doesn't mean that we won't face judgment ourselves, but we're safe, if you like, from the destruction that God will bring on a sinful world.

After this, John looked, and in heaven, the temple, that is the tabernacle of the testimony, was opened. The tabernacle of the testimony, or different translations will have slightly different words, the tent of meeting, or the tabernacle of meeting, or witness.

What is this about? What is being opened here in heaven? Again, we go back to Moses. Moses, after he'd led the people through the sea, led them into the wilderness before getting to the promised land, at Mount Sinai, where God appeared to Israel in thunder and smoke and cloud and so on, and with trumpet blasts, God gave the Israelites through Moses various instructions, laws, the Ten Commandments preeminently, but also the instructions to build the tent of meeting or the tabernacle.

And the book of Exodus devotes many chapters to those instructions and its building. That tent, sometimes called the tent of meeting, sometimes the tent of witness, was in a sense symbolic of God's presence with his people.

So all during the wilderness time, that tent was where the pillar of fire or cloud would lead the people from. It was where God was. That tent was filled with the glory of God.

[20 : 54] So at the end of the book of Exodus, even Moses cannot enter it because it's full of the glory of God. And that's what John sees in heaven. Now I suspect in heaven there isn't really a little tent of meeting like there was in the wilderness.

But you see, what John sees, he describes in terms that his people would understand. And of course in terms of the Exodus because it's a sign of God's guidance through difficulty through the wilderness.

And in a sense that's a small scale what's happening in the subsequent verses. It also reminds us that buildings like the tabernacle and later the Jerusalem temple, the first and second editions and so on, in some ways for us as Christians seem relatively unimportant.

And yet the writer to the Hebrews, for example, says that what those buildings are on earth is a shadow of the reality of heaven. They're built on the pattern of what heaven is like.

It may not mean that heaven is like a little building and there's lots of courtyards and so on. But rather it's suggesting that it resembles something of what heaven is like. So when John sees into heaven and sees the tabernacle, there is a truth about that.

[22 : 04] The tabernacle that was built on earth by Moses hundreds of years before John was, if you like, a foreshadowing of heaven. Where God's presence is really with his people.

In an immediate way. And an eternal way. And indeed he sees here not just the tabernacle but the temple. Which is probably the inside sanctuary bit of this temple.

That is into the very centre where God is. Now what happens from that temple? Out of it comes seven angels and they carry seven plagues. It's hard to see how you can see a plague being carried by an angel without seeing its effects.

And they come in the next chapter. The angels were dressed in clean shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. I doubt there's a lot of significance in what they're wearing. It's just general, noble and priestly attire. They're coming from the temple. That is they're coming from God's presence. But the symbol of what this is saying is to say to us that the judgment that is coming is God's judgment.

[23 : 08] It's not the world's. It doesn't come from some other origin. It comes from God himself. Then one of the four living creatures and these are creatures that we've seen a few times already in Revelation, going back to chapter 4, gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God who lives forever and ever.

These four living creatures are immediately around the throne of heaven in chapter 4. So it seems that these, they're the closest beings if you like to God himself on his throne.

And they give to these angels these golden bowls full of wrath. There's already been one golden bowl in Revelation and that's full of the incense of the prayers of the saints.

Maybe if there's a deliberate link, the golden bowls of wrath show the prayers of the saints being answered because the prayers of those saints work for God's vindication, for God's justice in this world.

And maybe now what we see is deliberately linked to that as the fulfillment or answer to those prayers. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power.

[24 : 21] And no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed. Just like Moses couldn't enter the tabernacle after it was built because it was full of God's glory, now nobody can enter the heavenly tabernacle until judgment is complete.

It's a bit like also the picture we have here is a bit like the vision Isaiah had in the temple. Isaiah the prophet was called before God, he saw the temple, it was filled with the glory of God, the train of God filled the temple and God called somebody to a task and Isaiah in the end received that task, it was a task of judgment mostly and in order for him to fulfill that task receive coals from the altar in the center of the temple to bring him forgiveness.

And in a similar way this is the same sort of thing. Judgment begins from God's very presence and goes forth into the world from there. Well that's all preparation now for these seven bowls to come in chapter 16.

It's typical of the book of Revelation that it sort of heralds something but then has a little interlude or preparation before it actually happens. But chapter 16 we have seven bowls.

And for those who've got really good memories when you read through this chapter of the bowls you may remember that when we saw the seven trumpets last year we saw pretty much what we're seeing again.

[25 : 46] I don't think we're going into an action replay here because what we're seeing is actually a little bit different but very linked to the seven trumpets. The first four seven trumpets like the first four bowls dealt with the earth, the sea, the waters, that is rivers and so on and the sun.

The same pattern bowls and trumpets. The fifth in both deals with darkness and pain and the sixth with both deals with enemy from the east and the seventh deals with earthquakes and so on.

So we get the same sequence of content in the trumpets back in chapters 8 and 9 and now in these bowls of chapter 16. But there is a very significant difference.

Back in chapter 8 it was stressed that only a third of the earth would be destroyed or a third of this would be destroyed. That is it was very limited judgment and the point of it was that it gave people an opportunity to change, to repent and turn to God.

But now when we get to these bowls that's not the case. Remember that chapter 15 began by saying this is the last of God's judgment. Now there's no chance to repent. This is the final thing and it shows us sadly that people have not heeded the warnings from the trumpets earlier on.

[27 : 01] They've kept in their sinful ways and now they face the full extent of the judgment of God. Judgment now is final. The time for repentance is over.

Something we as Christians need to remember. We so often presume upon the grace of God that he's going to be endlessly patient, endlessly forgiving, but there comes a time where that ends and God's judgment occurs and that's what we see in this chapter.

And the last prefatory comment for this chapter is again to remind us that the events of Moses and the Exodus are the background for this.

We've already seen the Red Sea, the tabernacle and so on, but going before the Red Sea the things that led up to it were the plagues that Moses brought against Pharaoh. That's what we see here again in a fuller way.

And just as those plagues against Pharaoh were God's judgment on Pharaoh, that was in a sense just a foreshadowing of God's final judgment on the world. And just as Pharaoh refused to repent, his heart was hardened more and more.

[28 : 09] So that's typical of humanity generally, which also we see in this chapter. But remember from the point perspective that we as Christians read this from. It's not to make us terrified.

We stand beside the sea, on the safe side of the sea, having been delivered by God. And that's the same here. The plagues of God against Pharaoh were the precursor to Israel's deliverance from Egypt.

And similarly here, these plagues, in a sense, go alongside our deliverance by the Lord Jesus Christ. So then, the seven bowls.

John hears a loud voice from the temple saying to the angels, go pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth. The first one poured his bowl on the land.

Ugly, painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshipped his image. When Moses brought plagues against Pharaoh, one of them was boils on the skin of the Egyptians.

[29 : 14] These may or may not have been boils, but I think there's an illusion back there. Similar sort of plague. Problems, sores, boils, etc. Breaking out on those people who are opposed to God.

Remember that Christians are not the targets of this. Those who are inflicted with these sores are not Christian people. They are those who had the mark of the beast and worshipped his image.

Christians are those who persevere without falling into that false worship. So it afflicts those who are engaged in the worship that is wrong. We saw that in the last session last year in chapters 12 to 14.

Those who worshipped the Roman Empire. Those who worshipped the Roman Emperor, his statues, and so on. The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea.

And it turned into blood like that of a dead man and every living thing in the sea died. If you know your book of Exodus, you'll see an instant illusion. One of the plagues that Moses brought against Egypt, the first plague, was to turn the Nile into blood.

[30 : 18] And things in the Nile died. Back in Revelation 8, the second trumpet turned only a third of the sea dead. This now is full, total judgment on the sea.

Of course, water is basic to life, so this is a pretty terrifying judgment or plague from God. The third angel, this time pours out his bowl on the rivers, the inland waterways, the springs, and so on.

They also became blood. Again, cutting off life. Again, the effect here is total and final. Whereas back in chapter 8 of Revelation, it was only a third.

It was limited in its effect. Then the fourth. No, before we get to the fourth. Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, you are just in these judgments, you who are and who were the Holy One, because you have so judged.

And that's an astonishing statement in the midst of such destruction, to say that God is just. It looks very severe judgment to our world. But this angel is acknowledging that God is fair and just in the judgment that he's bringing on the world.

[31 : 26] For God's judgment is never vengeful or spiteful or unduly harsh. It's never capricious or free. That is, it's not just random in its attack on somebody. God's judgment may look harsh, but it is entirely deserved.

The words that that angel is speaking are again words similar to the song of Moses in Exodus 15 and some of the Psalms. But the reason that this angel gives for God's judgment being just and fair is in verse 6.

For they, that is the people who've been the target of this judgment, they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.

See, this angel is recognizing that the punishment fits the crime. The crime that these people had is that they have killed Christians for their Christian faith.

Their judgment is that they are now made to drink blood. So the punishment fits the crime. It may look horrific to us. It will have looked even worse to John's readers because to eat or drink blood was absolutely and strictly forbidden in the Old Testament.

[32 : 38] Not only do we think it a bit grotesque, it's even more horrific for the original readers. But it's showing that God's punishment fits the crime. And so often in the Bible that's the case.

If you think back to the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve ate fruit from the tree that was forbidden. Part of the punishment on Adam was that he would now eat in the toil of his brow.

So it's a punishment that fits the crime there as well. And the same happens many places in the Bible. Romans 1 is another example if you want to look that up later.

Where God in a sense punishes people by the means of their own sin. And that's what's happening here. They shed the blood of the saints. Now they've got to drink blood in punishment from God.

Well the angel has said God is fair and just in his punishment. And now the altar speaks. It's a bit like a children's story where inanimate objects suddenly start speaking.

[33 : 40] The altar responds, Yes Lord God Almighty, true and just to your judgments. Well I must confess I've never seen a speaking altar. But I suspect that John hasn't quite gone mad here.

I think probably it's a voice from an altar. And the altar in heaven has already had underneath it the voices of martyrs. That is the spirits of the people, Christians who've been killed, are under the altar back in chapter 6.

I'm sure that that's who's speaking here. Because after all these are the slain prophets and saints. The ones whose blood has been shed. And they are now agreeing, if you like, or acknowledging God's justice or vindication of them and their faith.

So often in our life we face injustice. It's good to know that in the end, God is just. And reverses injustices.

And we can trust in that. Though we may need some patience to wait for it. The fourth angel. He pours out his bowl, or maybe she pours out her bowl, on the sun.

[34 : 47] And the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. Well, this is not an ancient version of what was needed for slip, slop, slap, or something like that.

This is something far more horrific, I think. In Exodus, the sun also is afflicted by a plague. But there it goes black, dark. The same occurred with the trumpet, the fourth trumpet.

When that afflicted the sun, it went dark. But now, surprisingly, perhaps, this sun scorches people. And it's intense heat. It's literally, in the next verse, verse 9, it says, they were seared by the intense heat.

Literally, they were scorched with a great scorching. Using the same word twice. But that's intensifying the heat of the sun. Again, it's a fairly terrifying picture here.

And again, unlike the trumpets, this is a full judgment. Back in the trumpets, it was partial judgment, just a third. Now it's full. Now there's no escape from the searing heat of this sun.

[35 : 54] Before we think, oh, is this really fair? Isn't this a bit awful? Remember that people have already had a warning. Those seven trumpets were warnings to the people who were around.

A third was destroyed. And those who survived are meant to think, hey, hang on a minute. My life's not right. Let me get it right. These now bowls show that people didn't do that. So the people who refused to repent when the sun went dark now face its scorching heat in the final judgment.

But notice also, verse 8 says, the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. That is, it was given power by whom? By God is the answer to that.

It is God who's in control here. It is God who's orchestrating what's going on. And if we're on God's side, we have nothing to fear. So the result is that these people were seared by the intense heat.

And did they repent? Did they say sorry, fall down on their knees? Of course not. They cursed the name of God who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him.

[37 : 03] How stubborn can you get? And yet, of course, that's typical of humanity generally through the Bible and through history. Pharaoh refused to repent.

People in ages after him refused to repent. It's the same today. Very often what happens is that suffering exposes our real relationship with God.

Very often, very often, suffering draws people to God. That is, it exposes our need and we realize our dependence upon an almighty God.

But sadly, very often, suffering seems to drive people away from God. I think what's happening there is that it's exposing the real relationship. And that's what's happening here.

These people, as they face the suffering of the warning judgments of the trumpets earlier on, go further and further away from God. Very often, you see, people, it's the suffering that gets to the heart of where people are at.

[38 : 06] When things are going well, it's easy to sort of pretend that our insides are alright, not deal with them, because life seems to be chugging along fairly happily. But when things fall off the rails, that's when the real state of the nation is revealed.

And sadly for many, it reveals an absence of a relationship with God. And so they refuse to repent. It's a warning to us, though, about how do we face suffering.

So often the New Testament tells us that suffering in itself may not be good, but it's used for a good purpose by God, to strengthen our faith and bring us perseverance and hope and so on.

Well, the fifth angel now, here takes the throne of the beast. That is the seat of authority of the Roman Empire, probably. And his kingdom, that is the beast's kingdom, was plunged into darkness. Here now is the darkness. Whether the sun that seared everybody and scorched everybody is now switched off or not, it's hard to know. But now comes the darkness, just like the plague, the ninth plague against Pharaoh.

[39 : 15] Men gnawed their tongues in agony. What an awful picture of what judgment would be like. I was trying to imagine gnawing my tongue. I'm not sure that I could. But I don't think it would be very pleasant.

And they cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done. So even this judgment coming on these people fails to bring people to repentance.

It's a sad picture. The darkness, I think, is an appropriate judgment as well because the New Testament makes it clear that those who choose not to worship God and therefore, in a sense, choose to follow Satan prefer darkness, not light.

And so again, the punishment fits the crime. If they want the darkness away from God's light, God, in a sense, is saying, let them have it. And he shuts the lights on their world.

The sixth angel, now in verse 12, pours out his bowl on the great river Euphrates and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings of the east. Now, the Euphrates is a river that runs through Iraq.

[40 : 27] The reason it's mentioned is probably because it formed the eastern border of the Roman Empire. And the Romans lived with some fear, I gather, of the Parthians who lived beyond the Euphrates.

They were a sort of feared potential enemy beyond the border. Just like Victorians sort of might fear, you know, South Australians crossing the border or the New South Welshman crossing the Murray River or something like that.

It's a border beyond which are this sort of unknown but fearful enemy that may come from the east. What's happening here is that the sixth bowl dries up that river.

That is, it takes away the defense system if you like. So now it's free for the kings of the east to come. That is, for the marauding armies of the enemies to come across the border.

The river Euphrates has already occurred in chapter 9 and there it's clear that it's a border between good and bad and so on. And from there in chapter 9 in the sixth trumpet would be unleashed armies or other angels to kill a third of mankind.

[41 : 33] Here though you don't get that limitation. Again, this is a picture of final judgment. Maybe there's an Old Testament background as well. Most of Israel's enemies came from the northeast.

From up where the Euphrates is, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians and so on. But now the boundaries dried up. The people are vulnerable to attack.

Who are these kings? What's going on here? One of the alternatives apparently is that when Nero died, took his own life, there was a rumour or growing legend, I guess, that Nero would return to the Roman Empire from across the Euphrates, from the Parthian side.

That would have been a fairly frightening prospect, I guess, for Christian people. And what I think this is a picture of now is anti-Christian enemy or anti-Christians coming from the east against God's people, against the empire and so on.

Now what follows in the next three verses, it's not quite clear whether it's linked to that or whether there's another little interlude before we get to the seventh verse. It's an odd sort of thing at first.

John sees in verse 13 three evil spirits that looked like frogs.

[42 : 53] Why frogs? Nobody seems to know. They came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. Three of the standard symbols of evil from the preceding chapters.

There was a plague of frogs by Moses on Pharaoh. Maybe that's why these are frogs. frogs. But it's also a comic picture because these are the great symbols of evil and terror from chapters 12 to 14. The beast, the mouth of the false prophet and the dragon. And yet, all they can issue forth are frogs. Which might be a bit scary if they surprise you at night.

I remember once in a caravan park in North Queensland going to the loo in the middle of the night and walking into the loo and lifting up the lid and out jump a few frogs and screaming my head off and feeling very embarrassed but very scared for about half a second.

But frogs really aren't that terrifying an animal in the end. So some suggest that this is actually a comic picture of the failure of evil. The beast, the dragon, they look so ferocious and so terrifying and yet all they can give you are evil spirits in the form of frogs.

[44 : 07] It's a bit of a mockery of evil. And maybe that's right or maybe that's reading too much into it. But what about these frogs? What do they do? They're spirits of demons. Verse 14 says performing miraculous signs and they go out to the kings of the whole world to gather them for battle on the great day of God Almighty.

So what it seems is that these kings who've come from the east if this is linked to that are Satan's or generals if you like. And what they're doing now is sending out their evil spirits in some way to gather the kings of the world.

spirits of demons performing miraculous signs. That is, they look powerful. They look as though they might even come from God. And very often, even in our own day and age, if somebody performs a miracle, people flock halfway around the world to go and see it or its remnants.

But so often they're deceptive, aren't they? And that seems to be what's going on here. Jesus predicted there would be people who'd come in the last days with false miracles, pretending to be from God.

That's why St. Paul, as well as the book of Deuteronomy and other places, warn us to be very careful and to test the spirits. Even if miracles are performed, it doesn't mean it's from God.

[45 : 21] For Satan has some power as well. But what it is a picture of is all these kings being gathered from the world to come together. A worldwide unification, if you like, which so much of our world today is looking for.

But this is a worldwide unification against God. trying to withthwart almighty God by all the people of the world in unison against him.

As if that would be more strong or stronger than God. This is the ultimate creaturely defiance, if you like. But it's nothing new. The Bible's expected it all along.

Wonder whether you know these words. Why do the nations conspire in the people's plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and his anointed, saying, let us burst their bonds asunder and cast their cords from us.

Psalms 2. And it goes on to say, he who sits in the heavens laughs. The Lord has them in derision. I think this is a picture of what's happening here.

[46 : 28] The world gathering together to fight almighty God once and for all. And I think God is laughing in his heaven. It may well be that God's people are terrified by the approaching armies and the gathering anti-godness of the world.

But God is not afraid of that. He is far more mighty than all the armies of the world put together. But just to reassure his people, persecuted people of the first century, facing all of this, maybe being scared or afraid, comes this little bracket in verse 15.

A little word of insurance and encouragement in the midst of what's going on in this final judgment. Behold, I, Jesus speaking, come like a thief.

Not to steal from them, of course. It's about the suddenness, the unexpectedness of Jesus' coming, not his morality. Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.

A parenthesis in the middle of an imminent battle. Jesus' words of encouragement, assurance, reminding his people that he's about to return, reminding them in effect that he's the saviour and expecting his people to be ready for him.

[47 : 49] Keep your clothes at hand. It doesn't mean literally, of course, but the clothes of God's people in the book of Revelation are the clothes that Jesus gives us through his death on the cross.

That's what he's talking about, being in a constant state of being clothed by his forgiveness, being clothed with a righteousness that comes from God himself. Satan and his forces may look invincible.

All the kings of the world may look invincible. But do not be afraid. God is mightier yet. And Jesus is at hand and it is all under his control.

Then we go back to this gathering battle. They, the kings of the world gathered, or the spirits gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

It's the only time this word occurs. Here in the Bible or in ancient literature. But how many books in our century are full of Armageddons?

[48 : 57] It's extraordinary how this one word has captured the imagination of this century. What is it? Nobody knows for sure.

The most likely thing is that the Hebrew word is Ha-Megiddo, which is the mountain, Ha is mountain, of Megiddo. Megiddo is a known place in Israel.

I've been there a few times. It's not all that impressive today. It's a mound and on the mound are lots of ruins that don't make a whole lot of sense unless you've got a guidebook. Why is Megiddo important?

It doesn't occur in the Old Testament all that often, though it's there a few times. Megiddo is important because it was situated at a very strategic place, at a major crossroads.

It's sort of the ancient Westfield shopping town, if you like, of the middle north of Israel. Well, not quite, but it's at a major crossroads. There was a whole line of mountains that ran sort of roughly from the northwest to the southeast across Israel, the top of it pointing out into the sea.

[50 : 07] If you've seen a map of Israel, it goes down fairly straight, but there's this little bump. That's the mountain ridge stemming out to the sea and Mount Carmel's on the end. And that was a fairly imposing mountain range.

And there were only a couple of passes through it. And one of them went right past Megiddo, the main one. So if you're going to pass this mountain range, basically you had to go through Megiddo to get past it.

Megiddo issued into this lovely valley that ran roughly east-west. Up to that side, sorry, I'm doing this in reverse image, but up to the Lebanon side, try and see it in reverse way, is another major road to the north.

And across that way was the road to Galilee and off to Mesopotamia, and down there's the road down to the Dead Sea and so on, and back through the pass is down to Egypt. Now in the ancient world, there aren't all that many freeways and motorways and highways and byways.

This was a major crossroads of the ancient world. Everybody who went to any major place in a sense went through or past Megiddo. It was so strategic that it therefore became a place where many battles were fought.

[51 : 13] In the 15th century BC, that's a little bit, well when Moses was a little boy probably, Thutmose III, the pharaoh of Egypt, fought a battle there.

In the Old Testament we know that Gideon fought near there, Judges V, Deborah and Sisera was fought just down the road from there, the Assyrians when they came fought there, and Sennacherib's army on his way back from Jerusalem died there.

A bit after that, King Josiah, foolishly it seems, went to cut off the Egyptian pharaoh as he was travelling north to Babylon. He went to cut him off at Megiddo and Josiah the good king was killed there.

Jumping on a little bit from Josiah, that's in 609 BC or thereabouts, Alexander the Great fought a battle there. The Maccabees, some Jewish rebels if you like, overthrew some Greeks there in a battle in about 160 BC.

Later on in the Crusades, there were Crusader battles near and at Megiddo. Napoleon declared that Megiddo was the ideal battleground in the world, except that he lost there.

[52 : 24] And in 1917, Allenby, Lord Allenby of England, fought a decisive battle in the First World War there and defeated the Ottomans. So all types of history have fought major battles at Megiddo.

Now of course John and the visionaries given to John didn't understand some of that subsequent history. They didn't have as much as we now have for Megiddo. But Megiddo is a strategic place of battle.

Now having said that, is this talking about another battle at Megiddo? Most people who write books about Armageddon these days think yes.

But it seems to me the book of Revelation is so full of symbols that I think we have to be very cautious about that. I don't think that's talking about a literal battle on the Jezreel plain just near Megiddo.

I think Megiddo stands for battles and war. It's a symbol, if you like, of warfare. And here in Revelation 16 it's a symbol of the final stand against God himself.

[53 : 33] One of the interesting things about it though is that there's no description of the battle given. It almost avoids the battle itself. It happens on the one, the great day of the Lord God Almighty in verse 14.

But in verse 15 it talks about Christ's return. And in verses 17 onwards talks about earthquakes. It's almost as though the battle's been avoided. But they gather there for battle and as they're gathered God just defeats them through other means.

So Armageddon I guess is a place of defeat of evil ultimately. Well a seventh bowl now occurs in verse 17 onwards. It's thrown into the air.

A voice comes from the temple in heaven saying it is done. Just as Jesus said on the cross it is finished. So these words resonate with that statement as well. The final judgment of God has occurred.

I think the words deliberately allude to Jesus' words. Because really when all is said and done it was all finished on the cross. And the book of Revelations made that clear. Because all of what we're reading here in Revelation 16 derives from Jesus' death on the cross and opening the scroll in chapter 5.

[54 : 42] The fact that there's this voice from heaven reminds us that the final word is God's word. Not his enemies' words. And then come the lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, earthquake.

No earthquakes ever occurred like this on earth. So tremendous it was. The great city split into three parts. Not Megiddo. I think it's talking about the Roman Empire or Rome.

And the cities of the nations collapsed. You see this battle never eventuates in a sense. They all gather ready for battle. But God comes and it's all destroyed. There's no real fight in the end.

God remembered Babylon the great and gave her the cup filled with wine of the fury of his wrath. Babylon is a symbol standing for Rome. We'll see more of that next week and the week after.

Babylon, we're told, back in chapter 14, has given out wine of its own fornication.

That is alluring people to follow it. Now, punishment fits the crime. It's given wine. But this time the wine of God's wrath. Every island fled away.

[55 : 44] The mountains could not be found. Maybe that's of significance for John, exiled on an island in the Aegean Sea. And from the sky, huge hailstones, like the hailstones that had come against Pharaoh back in Exodus chapter 9, huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men.

And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail because the plague was so terrible. You'd think at the very last they would repent. But no, they cursed God.

People who are so intransigent in their anti-God stance, their sin, their stance is so incorrigible that even the final judgment will not force them to change their minds.

They're still unrepentant. In many ways, this is a very bleak section of the book of Revelation.

Because after each of the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh bowls, explicit mention is said that people still did not repent.

Sad picture, isn't it? Very sad picture. That even those things could not make people change their minds. So much of this section strikes chords with us today.

[56 : 56] So often people read this and think our world is becoming like this. The ozone layer, pollution, nuclear holocaust threats and so on. It could very easily turn out like this.

But let us not be people of despair. Because this is written for Christians and it's written to encourage them to persevere with confidence in God.

But that's not a new message of the Bible either. Remember these words of the psalmist which sum it up so well. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore, we will not fear. Though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult, there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of that city. It shall not be moved. God will help it when the morning dawns. The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter. He utters his voice and the earth melts.

[58 : 07] The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge. Come, behold the works of the Lord. See what desolations he has brought on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the end of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the shields with fire. Be still and know that I am God.

I am exalted among the nations. I am exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.

It could almost be a commentary on Revelation 16, couldn't it? Let's have a minute's silence and then we'll sing those words.

Amen. Peace. Cheers. Thank you.