

The Wrath the World Needs

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Preacher: Rev. Jeremy Graham

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Well, we've got a doozy of a passage this morning, and we won't, trust me, we will not be able to get to everything in this text this morning, but I would love to chat with you after the service if you have any questions, anything that we weren't able to discuss that was troubling you or that you were curious about.

I'd be happy to talk to you. Normally, David Short, he just directs people to talk to Dan after the service, but I'm still young and naive, so I'm happy to take your questions.

Well, this week, the tiny nation of Gambia made the news. Gambia is in West Africa, and I don't know if you saw this, but the former leader, Yayay Jeme, he finally agreed to be exiled after losing a democratic election last year.

Yet, even as he was leaving the country, he managed to secure over 11 million U.S. dollars, and also he managed to drive a full cargo plane's worth of luxury cars onto that plane, and probably, maybe he piloted himself, but he took off from this little country with all that money and all those luxury cars for a luxurious exile in a neighboring African nation playing with his new toys watching the sunset.

Leaving behind a new president governing 1.9 million people with empty coffers and a GDP of about \$490 per year per capita per person, yeah.

[1 : 46] Where's the justice in that? Where's the justice in that? And this is just the latest and by no means the most serious of countless stories of injustice and evil that you can think of that have happened even just this week.

And our passage this morning is a vision from the Lord Jesus Christ of the wrath of God poured out against all the sin and evil and injustice and opposition to the throne of God.

And believe me, it's going to be very helpful if you have your Bibles open this morning to Revelation 15 on page 1036. Because when you do so, the first thing that we notice is that these two chapters are bookended by the wrath of God.

We see the wrath of God in chapter 15, verse 7, and then right near the end of the passage in chapter 16, verse 9. The wrath of God.

Now surely wrath, come on now, wrath is a pretty distasteful thing to be talking about in 2017, isn't it? I mean, isn't it a sort of barbaric, primitive idea from the Old Testament that we've evolved beyond that?

[3 : 01] We're too sophisticated to keep talking about wrath, aren't we? I think we feel this way mostly because we mistake God's wrath for a sort of a divine temper tantrum, like God just flying off the handle in a capricious and malicious emotional response to people not doing what he wants.

And I'm sorry to have to admit that that description of wrath is probably closer to what it looks like when I get angry, not what it looks like when God gets angry.

You know, when I think about parenting, and I think about, you know, all right kids, I'm going to count to three, and then I'm going to get angry. Three, two, one, nothing, right?

Kids, I'm going to count down from 12, 12, 11, you know? When I get angry, when I think about it, it's not really justice that's at the root of it.

It's mostly my desire for them to do what I want so that I can get what I want. Maybe it's go to sleep so that I can get a few hours of peace and quiet before I turn in for the night. This is just hypothetical, but...

[4 : 06] No, I mean, this is how we think about wrath. But God's wrath in Scripture is His righteous and holy response to sin. And it may surprise you to learn that God's wrath against sin is actually a central theme in all of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation.

And it's actually more prominent as Scripture unfolds. We see it grow in prominence in the teachings of Jesus and in the other New Testament authors.

Nonetheless, a gospel without any wrath or judgment is still very attractive to us because it appears to offer all the advantages and happy endings without any of the grisly bits.

But here's the thing. When we open up Revelation together, we discover that that kind of gospel is just false advertising. Because judgment and salvation are really two sides of the same coin.

We heard David talk about this last week. You can't have meaningful salvation without meaningful justice. And because sin is far more than simply my own moral failure, it's actually a personal offense against the Holy God who created me.

[5 : 23] If I try to imagine a salvation without any need for judgment, it just cheapens everything. And most of all, it cheapens the love of God.

We're going to get to that later. Yet, as we've seen countless times, even the church can slip into this temptation.

It happens. It's happened all through history. And it happened, in particular, it reached a zenith.

When liberal Christianity was at its zenith, it reached a zenith in its expression and led to a well-known writer, Richard Niebuhr, writing just a scathing summary of this false gospel.

Let me quote Richard Niebuhr. He says, A God without wrath brought men and women without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.

So we come to Revelation 15 and 16, and Jesus is giving us a vision of the wrath that the world needs.

[6 : 33] The wrath of God, which is his righteous, loving, and perfect response to the activities we've seen in chapter 12 to 14, the activities of the dragon and the beasts, and also the injustice and the evil that you and I have experienced and seen all around us.

But we need the gift of a heavenly perspective, of God's perspective on judgment. So praise be to God for these chapters. And let's have a look at them together under three headings.

First of all, the heavenly perspective on judgment. And secondly, the unearthly perspective on judgment. And finally, Jesus speaks. Let's dive into the heavenly perspective.

If you have your Bibles open, we'll begin in chapter 15. Well, if you've been reading Revelation through this sermon series, you probably already noticed there's some echoes here.

Because you might remember that we had seven seals broken, and then we heard seven trumpets blown, and now there are seven bowls being poured out.

[7 : 44] So the question is, is human history just on an endless treadmill of suffering and plagues? Absolutely not, because these are not endless cycles.

You'll be happy to learn this is the last one. And the key to understanding the cycles, especially this one, is especially in the differences. And those differences are this, that the trumpets, when they were blown, they brought partial judgment.

It says a third was destroyed. But look at verse 3 of chapter 16. The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was on the earth.

The difference here is that this destruction is total now. And secondly, the trumpets were a declaration of the eternal gospel, and a call to respond in repentance.

But now we see in the bowls, we see the beginning of the final divine judgment. And it's going to unfold all the way through 16, 17, 18, 19. There is no repentance now.

[8 : 45] And then finally, we know that we're getting near the end of all these cycles, because three times in these two chapters, we get this line, it is finished, it is finished, it is done.

Because the wrath of God is not endless. It has a beginning, and it has a purpose, and it has a completion. And these bowls of wrath are delivered at the command of God as punishment upon the dragon and the beasts and all those who serve them.

And we get to verse 5 to 7, and we see the heavenly response. Look at verse 5 with me. And I heard the angel in charge of the water say, Just are you, O holy one.

And then look down at verse 7. Yes, Lord God, the Almighty, true and just are your ways. So how do we know God is just? Well, these verses tell us that we know God is just, because God's perfect judgment always fits the crime.

Look at verse 6. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It's what they deserve. Just to be clear, the they here is speaking about the dragon

and the beasts and all those who have the mark of the beast.

[10:07] It's they who are getting judged. And it's an ugly picture. The guilty are made to drink a cup of blood, just like the blood that they shed. And yet it comes, did you notice this, as part of a song of praise that this angel is singing, which echoes the song of praise in chapter 15.

And this is so important for us, because this heavenly perspective on judgment, it counters what I think is a very modern Christian tendency to apologize for judgment.

And the wrath of God is God's measured and holy response to sin. And it provides the perfect justice that all humanity longs for. It's not something that Scripture apologizes for.

But there is a second thing that we learn here that's very important as well, and that is that God's judgment is patient. He's a patient judge. And where do we see this? Well, it's in that funny little line in verse 7, and I heard the altar saying.

What's an altar doing speaking? Well, you're getting used to this kind of stuff though, right?

Everything speaks in Revelation. Well, back in chapter 6, verse 9, when the seven seals were being opened, we heard the souls of saints who had been slain crying out for justice from under that altar.

[11:26] And they were crying out, How long, O Lord? How long? Because God's own people were suffering and dying, and they're crying out, just like the psalmist in Psalm 13 cries out four times, How long, O Lord?

How long till we see your justice? And then in chapter 6, strangely, they're told to wait, which doesn't seem, it seems a little insensitive, doesn't it? But here in 16.7, we see the altar, which is symbolic for all those slain who were crying out for justice.

We say, it says, Yes, Lord, true and just are your judgments. Because God's timing in judgment is not the same as our timing. Again, I think of how I am with my children, and too often I'm impatient, I'm emotional and reactive in my responses.

Because my anger is not actually justified. Revelation, though, uses a symbol of a cup when it talks about God's wrath.

And actually this symbol is, as with many of the symbols in Revelation, is found all through Scripture. The cup of wrath. And so imagine that God has a cup.

[12:33] And all through human history, all the sins of humanity have been poured into this cup. So that it's gradually filling up. And even as it's filling up, and God is watching this heartbroken, He is also crying out to His people, and saying, Turn back, turn away, turn back to me.

Judgment is coming. But there's still time for repentance. And yet people's hearts are hard, and they keep pouring, they keep sinning, and the sin keeps pouring into this divine cup of wrath, until finally, it is filled up.

And when the cup is finally filled, as it is here in Revelation 16, then the time for patience and forbearance is ended.

And the time for justice and judgment has come. And this is the wrath that the world needs. It's heaven's response to the... It's heaven's response to the sin that has been a part of our world ever since the Garden of Eden.

And the heavenly response to this judgment is to praise God for His loving patience and for His holy justice in the face of evil.

[13:49] And I wonder, do we ever praise God for His holy and good judgment? Do we ever praise God for that justice? And secondly, we see an earthly perspective on judgment.

And here we're going to focus on plagues 4 to 7 in verses 8 to 21 of chapter 16. And did you notice how chapter 15 and 16 are full of echoes from the book of Exodus?

So we see plagues which echo the plagues of darkness and blood and the hailstones and frogs. And then at the beginning of our reading, we saw that the sanctuary of the tent, which literally means the tabernacle, is opened.

And it reminds us of Exodus again. And we see smoke here and we hear thunder just like at Mount Sinai. And then we read about the glory of God, which is also in the book of Exodus. And lastly, we see three times in these chapters the followers of the dragon and the beast responding to these plagues.

And they respond the same way that the pharaoh in Egypt responds. Look at verse 9. Verse 9. They were scorched by the fierce heat.

[15:01] They cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory. Verse 11. They cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not

repent of their deeds.

And third, in verse 21, they cursed God for the plague of the hail because the plague was so severe. Now this is just like what Pharaoh did in refusing to let God's people go. But the people here, they actually go one step further which interestingly is just what Pharaoh does. And look at verse 14 and following. It's the pouring out of the sixth bull.

And here we see, you know, as if Revelation couldn't get any weirder, you got to get ready here for demonic spirit frogs. Okay? So, John sees coming out of the mouth of the dragon and the mouth of the beast and the mouth of the false prophet which is the second beast, three unclean spirits like frogs.

They are demonic spirits performing signs who go abroad to the kings of the whole world to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. And then look down at verse 16. And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

[16:13] What the heck is happening here? We are witnessing the deception of the beast. Because those who are under the beast, they're hardening their hearts just like Pharaoh did.

And they refuse to repent. They curse God. But even worse, just like Pharaoh, they are actually assembling against the Lord God and his people in warfare believing that they can conquer God Almighty and avoid judgment.

You see, the deception here is allowing ourselves to be deceived into thinking that we can not only rebel against God but we can actually win. And 500 years ago, John Milton gave his character of Satan in Paradise Lost, he gave him this famous line, better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven. And this perfectly describes the delusion that we see here. Satan and his allies, they trick people into distrusting God's good purposes in bringing forth judgment.

The good purposes that we heard sung about in verses 5 to 7. So that like the beasts, they blaspheme God and they curse him rather than turning in repentance. And their curses are the exact opposite of the praise.

[17:30] The deception of all those who worship the beast, it reminds me of what happens to the character of Edmund when he first comes to Narnia in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. He meets the white witch for the first time and she offers him Turkish delight.

And once he's eaten it, he can no longer see the goodness of Aslan. Even as he hears about Aslan from the beavers and with his brother and his two sisters, he's suspicious and he's asking, can we really trust this lion?

What do we know about him? He's speaking like the witch. He grows increasingly suspicious and actually he's longing for more of the witch's food. And he can't taste any of the good things of Narnia.

But when he gets to the witch's house the second time, she has nothing good for him. She has nothing good for him to eat. No more Turkish delight. It's hard, stale bread and water. Brothers and sisters, our job as witnesses to the truth of Christ is to communicate and live out a picture of salvation and judgment that's not the beast's picture.

To bear witness to the Lamb who alone is worthy to be praised. And there's one more thing we must always remember whenever we talk about the wrath of God. It's that knowledge of future judgment is always a call to present repentance.

[18:54] Let me say that again. Knowledge of a future judgment is always a call to a present repentance. Because Christianity is not fatalistic. We don't look at these chapters and go, well, these people didn't repent.

There's no hope. Even if I wanted to, it's too late. Those in this vision, they don't repent. But we're given it in order to recognize the seriousness of sin and therefore turn and receive the gift of forgiveness and redemption in Jesus Christ.

And that brings us to our third and final point where Jesus speaks to us. And this is chapter 16, verse 15. And you could almost just kind of gloss right over it, couldn't you?

Because it's in brackets there. But this is the first time that Jesus has spoken directly to us since chapter 4. And each time he speaks in Revelation, just let your ears kind of perk up and listen. It's very important. He says here words of both blessing and warning. He says, Behold, look, I am coming. There's a promise.

[20:05] Like a thief, it's going to be unexpected. Blessed is the one who stays awake keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed.

I feel like I say this all the time in Revelation. What is going on here? If I was going to do a youth talk downstairs on Revelation 16, I think I would call it keep your clothes on.

Because the key phrase in this verse is keeping his garments on. Not because it's about purity or even practicality, like, you know, Jesus is telling you keep slippers under your bed in case there's an earthquake at night.

Have you noticed how many references there are to clothing in Revelation? Revelation has its own fashion industry. And I'll just give you a few quick examples.

In chapter 3, when Jesus is speaking to the seven churches, he says to Sardis, You have a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white.

[21 : 03] And to Laodicea, he says, I counsel you to buy white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen. That sounds just like this. And then in chapter 7, verse 9, we see a vision of the whole multitude of people in heaven from every nation standing before the throne and before the Lamb clothed in white robes.

And finally, the key verse in chapter 7, 13 and 14, we see those clothed in white, and the elder explains to us that these are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.

They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. So it's not really that heaven has its own dress code or sort of a fashion line. It's clothing that is used as a symbol in Revelation, a symbol of the righteousness of Christ.

A symbol of the righteousness of Christ. Through Christ's death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, we put on robes that have been washed white and made white in the blood of the Lamb. And here in the midst of John's vision of the judgment of God, Jesus speaks directly to us and he reminds us that it's only in his death and in his propitiation which means the taking on to himself of the wrath that God was going to place on us, the wrath we deserve.

[22 : 27] It's only in his death and propitiation that we are protected from the judgment of God. Because we're tempted to seek after a false gospel which offers salvation without any need for judgment.

But the good news of the gospel isn't that there's no judgment. The good news of the gospel is that we stand undeniably guilty under God's judgment and yet his wrath did not fall on you and me but it fell on his son Jesus in our place.

And the more you and I live out and apply the righteousness of Christ the more we are able to stay awake and alert against the deceptions of the evil one. And the more we live in dependence on God's grace and we walk day by day lives clothed and protected by Christ then the more we live into the blessings that Christ promises for us here.

Because friends if we dress up in any other garments no matter how fancy and polished the world may tell us we look we are really just walking around like the emperor who wore no clothes except we're not just it's not just foolishness it's worse it's destruction.

And I'm so glad that I don't read this chapter and hear instructions from God about how we're called to be little mini judges everywhere we go.

[24 : 00] Aren't you? Because when we hear stories like the one in the news about the Gambian president you know if it was a Hollywood movie it would end with Arnold Schwarzenegger taking out a bazooka a rocket launcher and shooting down that cargo plane and that would be justice right?

But that's not justice. We have a promise here in this vision from Revelation that the Lord God who is just and true will pour out his wrath and it's exactly the wrath that the world needs because it brings about perfect justice and restores all good things.

And so we close asking how how are you clothed for that great day? How are you clothed for that great day?

Amen.