

THE WRATH OF GOD

Revelation 16

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Our Scripture today is from the 16th chapter of the Book of Revelation. Reading Revelation 16 may strike you as coming in at the close of World War II with a lot of airplanes flying overhead. They're dropping bombs, and you don't know who's on whose side or why or if they're winning or losing. I think as we look at Revelation 16 today I'm going to spend most of my time getting a context for this chapter and talking some about the wrath of God and then taking the later part of the message today to look at the content of Revelation 16 itself. This is the third sequence of judgments pronounced in the Book of Revelation: seals, trumpets, and now bowls.

In the New International Version, Revelation 16 says, "Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, 'Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth.'

The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image.

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.

The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood.

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; for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.' And I heard the altar respond: 'Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.'

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The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him.

The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.

The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East. Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; 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. They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.

‘Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.’ Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon. The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘It is done!’ Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. From the sky 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.”

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Several years ago I had occasion to be in a synagogue service. At the conclusion several of us were in dialogue with one of the cantors. I asked him how modern Judaism functioned without blood sacrifice, how he saw, as a lay person in the Jewish faith, atonement being accomplished. I referred to Leviticus 17:11, a kind of key passage in the Old Testament that deals with forgiveness of sins. It says, “The life of the flesh is in the blood. I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life.” I said in lieu of the fact that since 70 A.D. when the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem there has been no blood sacrifice that has been part of Judaic faith, how is it that a modern Jew exercising his faith understands atonement for sins? How are you forgiven for the law, which is broken?

I’ll never forget his reaction. He became very embarrassed and apologetic. He indicated to me that modern Judaism had now outgrown the primitive and barbaric customs of the past. His view toward sacrifice was that it came from an earlier time when more primitive culture existed. Now with a greater refined sense of ethics to talk about blood sacrifice these days was to be out of date.

I. Many Christians today have the same kind of embarrassment towards such themes as the wrath of God, judgment, and hell, as this man did that sacrifice was the only way sins could be forgiven.

We hear phrases like people say, “I like to go to a church where they talk about the love of God and your potential as a person and not all this hell and damnation stuff.” I think all of us want to go to a church that talks about the love of God and your potential as a person.

But I wonder if we’d been persons aboard the Titanic years ago what course we would have taken if we had the knowledge that the iceberg was approaching. I thought if there were two

seminars being held on the Titanic for the people one called “Improving Your Enjoyment of an Ocean Cruise,” and the other, “How to Survive a Collision with an Iceberg,” which do you think would have been more popular? Obviously if you knew that an iceberg were going to collide with the Titanic, you would have chosen “How to Survive a Collision.” It would not make a whole lot of sense to talk about “Improving Your Enjoyment,” when an iceberg was just twenty-four hours away. If you knew for sure that there would be a collision then you could take that seminar, and pass it, and go on to enjoy whatever time remains to enjoy the ocean cruise.

That is somewhat analogous, I think, to when we talk about the wrath of God. What is being said in the wrath of God is that God has appointed a day in which He’s going to judge the world. Inevitability of God’s wrath is fixed and certain. If we talk as ministers of the gospel or as Christian lay people about our life and our potential as a human and only talk in public about those subjects which make us feel good and happy, and neglect great themes of the Scripture which speak to us about eternal consequences of decision, we fall short of God’s will for us and we leave out something that is crucial to an understanding and worship of the God of Scripture. It’d be well for a moment to really talk about why it is important to proclaim the wrath of God. Why would I risk that on a Sunday morning when perhaps I’d rather talk about maximizing your potential as a human being and getting through the nitty-gritty of life? One reason why we must proclaim the wrath of God is because the Scriptures proclaim the wrath of God. The Scriptures are telling us and perhaps reducing it to modern language that we are on a space ship in the universe that is headed for a collision. This planet is in rebellion against the God who created it. And He is ultimately going to destroy it. There are people who say, I don’t like that one bit. I would respond, I don’t like it either. God doesn’t either. That’s why He sent the Lord Jesus Christ into the world to bring all of those who will into eternal fellowship with Him. There are

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things about the Bible, things about God that we rebel against as human beings. Or maybe things we do not understand.

The second commandment says “You shall make no idols.” The very essence of idol worship is to start out with one’s own idea of what God is like and then to say “God cannot be anything like what I’ve not agreed upon previously. If it is not what I think God should be then God can’t be that.” That’s the very essence of idolatry. Beginning to worship God is understanding who God is, how He has revealed himself, and who He’s declared himself to be.

Do you know the first doctrine of Scripture was that was denied? The first doctrine that was denied in Scripture was denied by Satan himself in the form of a serpent, where he said to the woman, “You shall not die” (Genesis 3:4). The Lord had said, “The day you eat you shall die” (Genesis 2:17). The first doctrine denied in Scripture is the doctrine of judgment. And it is the doctrine which today probably of all the doctrines that the Scripture proclaims is the doctrine most strongly denied in the world. We can and we do want to talk about the God of love. But the God who upholds justice and who passes sentence is not a popular theme.

But we must take the Scripture in its entirety, if we are to let it guide our faith instead of letting our faith be like the faith of Thomas Jefferson, who took the Bible, cut out the portions he liked, pasted them in and formed himself a new Bible. We’ve either got to do that with the Scripture or we’ve got to take the Scripture as a whole.

The Scripture bears witness to the wrath of God. Jesus bears witness to the wrath of God. Jesus spoke more of judgment and hell and separation eternally from God than any other person in the Scripture. Jesus said, “I am come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). You don’t save that which was found. You save that which was lost. The Lord’s view of all of us as human beings is that “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). The

Lord came to seek and to save those who are lost. We cannot be found until we recognize we are indeed lost. You cannot save someone who is found. Jesus bears witness to the fact that all of are under the wrath of God.

II. I think one of the things that disappears when you lose an understanding of the wrath of God, one of the things that goes out the window is the grace of God.

This understanding which the apostle Paul said when he indicated, “I am the chiefest of sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15), we fall into an easy pattern of salvation when we say something to the effect “I’m a pretty good person and I think I’ll add Jesus as my friend.” All that may be well and good but there comes this reality as you approach the Scripture that we are sinful people saved by God’s great grace. Not a merit of our own has earned it. Karl Menninger has said it well in which he called for a revival and restoration in the world today of the word “sin” in our vocabulary. It is when we understand that we have sinned and God’s wrath rests upon us that we can begin to catch a glimpse of the great mercy of God that brought Jesus into the world to save us from our sin and save us from the wrath of God.

Scripture bears witness to the wrath of God. That’s why we must proclaim it. Jesus bears witness to the wrath of God. I think our experience also bears witness to the wrath of God because we believe as human beings that in the end ultimately good must prevail. I think even the wicked believe this. You can see in our culture a faint trace of the image of God even in TV crime shows. The hero usually lives to the end of each program. That’s a very dim reflection of the image of God, a kind of recognition in human nature that we will not accept even a drama ending where evil has triumphed. We call upon the moral foundations of the universe, the moral fabric of life itself that God has created the world with moral insight and He is a God who will ultimately establish justice.

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Then we have to ask, “Is God’s wrath moral?” An immediate objection is often raised of God exercising His wrath like Revelation 16. If God is going to exercise His wrath, what about the heathen? What about people of other religions? What about just plain good people who haven’t accepted the Lord? I really believe there are some questions we ought to leave with God and not wrestle with ourselves. God has some responsibilities here. My responsibility is “What about me?” not “What about them?” I think when we raise a question like that we should be just as humble in talking to God about morals and ethics as we would be if we were talking to an astronomer about the physical universe and the stars. A good deal of humility is called for. We as a human race do not have a good record on moral choice.

What if someone announced a new invention that would do two things? It would first of all make life immensely easier and more enjoyable. And secondly this invention would create millions of jobs, revolutionize the economy and immensely raise the standard of living. The only requirement is that every year in the United States alone there would be a quota of 50,000 human sacrifices. What would we do with such a choice?

We’re already making that choice as human beings. I’m referring to the automobile. That is the consequence of this human invention. We’re so deep into the automobile we can’t back off and say, “Let’s do away with the automobile in order to keep 50,000 people a year from being sacrificed.” We are not very good experts about hauling God into the defense box and bringing Him before the jury of human opinion. We do not seem to have the ability to make good moral choices ourselves. It’s strange in our culture where the morality of God is the most questioned is the same culture where divorce practically exceeds marriage, abortion may exceed births. And the haves take from the have nots. All this society Paul calls into question and says, “God are You moral.” Isaiah, I think, had it right. When we come into the presence of God with the right

frame of mind, even if we're an outstanding person like Isaiah and we cry out, "Woe is me, for I am undone" to really see God is to recognize one's own inadequacy (see Isaiah 6).

In Genesis 18:25, Scripture raises the question: "Shall not the judge of all the earth be right?" God is judge. He's the one who's going to act with authority. He's one who is identified with good and right. He's not impartial. He's partial towards justice and righteousness. He's a person of wisdom as judge to discern with truth. All facts will be known to Him. He is a person of honor to execute sentence. We might well ask, if God indeed is moral and if the wrath of God shall be proclaimed, how then is God's wrath to be poured out? The Scriptures give us a backdrop in approaching Revelation 16. Romans 1 for example tells us that the wrath of God is already revealed from human experience. When people turn away from serving God to worship other things, other ideas, God then gives them up. They bear the consequences of their choices in human experience. This is why people live not with the peace of God but with the wrath of God. We also need to recognize that before the wrath of God is poured out finally that Matthew 24:14 must be fulfilled. This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come. God does not act until the whole world is aware of the good news of salvation.

III. I think there's another facet that is going on in steps leading to God's wrath.

It's found in Revelation 15:7. I didn't comment on it last week. The text said, "One of the four living creatures gave the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever." In other words, the wrath of God was held by the four living creatures. Flip back in your mind to Revelation 4 when we were introduced to the throne of God. About the throne of God were four living creatures who are identified as having the appearance of a lion, an ox, an eagle, and a man. Indicating in Revelation 4, no doubt, what is intended to be conveyed

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here are seraphim or angelic beings, personifications of nature. The lion represents what is the most majestic and powerful among the created order. The man represents intelligence and rational choice in nature. The eagle represents that which is loftiest and swiftest in nature. The ox represents patience in labor. In effect that these beings are handing over the wrath of God to the angels what it suggests to us in symbolic form is that nature itself in the end hands itself over to God that it might be used to accomplish God's purposes in His final judgment. Nature in the end becomes full of all sorts of rips and stains. So the bowls are poured out.

The sequence of the final judgment is given in Revelation 16. It's a re-enactment of the judgments and the plagues of the Exodus. Bowls are poured out, each of them on different realms. The bowl poured out on the earth brings to those who bear the mark of the beast. These are persons who've made a conscious choice to follow the Antichrist rather than Christ. Now what has been a badge of honor, a badge that has been used to purchase things, to buy and sell goods, now becomes broken out with sores and blisters and hurts. It is as though God built into that mark a radiation ingredient, which would come back upon the person who took the mark willingly.

The bowl poured into the sea brings a final pollution to the sea, so the sea becomes filled with the substance, which is in the appearance of coagulated blood. I think mankind is a long way to fulfilling this second plague. The sea is polluted as it is. I don't think it'd take a whole lot more to shove it over the edge.

There's the bowl that is poured into fresh waters therefore drawing up or draining out or eliminating the great part of water supply of the human race. When the fresh water is struck as it was turned to blood in Egypt, now there's something new. An angel says, "Just and true are Thy judgments" (Revelation 16:7). We look at that and say, an angel of water? What is that? For a

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minute we have to back off and look at literature, look at the apocalyptic type of literature and recognize that Revelation has three angel developments: an angel of fire, an angel of wind, and an angel of water. These elements are seen as personified beings who care for them. What is being suggested in this text is that when the water becomes filled with blood, the angel which would in effect be the guardian of that race might protest “You can’t do this,” the angel instead says, “That’s only righteous because those people who have the mark of the beast have drunk the blood of the saints and prophets and their treatment is just. It is due them.” In effect what is being said here is the punishment fits the crime.

That happens all the time today. We have used our knowledge of nature to create devastating nuclear bombs. We must live in terror of them and breathe and eat the deadly fallout left by their testing. We’ve impoverished the world in the manufacture of conventional weapons. We must live with that burden of heavy taxes, unfed poor, inadequate housing. Man receives back from nature the due penalty for his misuse of it. That principle is being demonstrated in the final judgment. It’s demonstrated in family relationships. If you’re mean to your kids they’ll grow up to be mean to you. Due penalty. Just and true are Your judgments, O God.

There’s a bowl poured out upon the sun in verses 8 and 9. That’s the fourth bowl. These are people who’ve heard the Christian message, warned of the judgment. They accept the existence of God. But they curse the name of God who has power over the plagues and do not repent and give Him glory. Now the judgments are not being poured out upon atheists. These are people who know the God of the gospel and harden their heart as did Pharaoh against the God of the Israelites in the Old Testament and deliberately and willfully curse God and say back to God, “Let God be damned.”

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The fifth bowl is poured on the throne of the beast. The capital of the Antichrist is affected and plunged into darkness. Again there is rebellion and harshness against God, rather than repentance.

The sixth plague involves a bowl poured out on the great river Euphrates, a river rich in biblical history. To sum up briefly, the Euphrates was regarded as the northernmost border of the nation of Israel. To dry up a river in ancient days meant to take away the physical protection that the river afforded for natural defenses. In the sixth century when Cyrus the Persian invaded Babylon, Babylon was impregnable. You couldn't take the town because of its walls. They had an assured water supply. The river Euphrates flowed through their town underneath their walls. Cyrus did a very smart thing. He built a dam upstream and diverted the Euphrates and marched underneath the wall where the Euphrates had flowed into the city. So to dry up the Euphrates had significance to people who lived in the biblical world. It meant that now the time of God's holding back the hordes from the east for the great battle of Armageddon in Palestine, that day was over. There was a warning to the believer to be aware and alert to any time that the Lord might come.

Finally there is a bowl poured into the air. When it is done with, a great earthquake affects all the major cities of the world and mountains and islands collapse. Again, for the third time in seven plagues cursing toward God erupts. Revelation 16 closes on the note that men curse God for the plague of hail. C. S. Lewis made this statement, "I would pay any price to say truthfully all will be saved. We must remember the Lord not only said it but He paid the price that all might be saved. My reason retorts all will be saved with their will or without it. If I say they will be saved without their will I at once perceive a contradiction. How can the supreme act of self-surrender be involuntary? If I say that a person could be saved without their will then how can salvation

which is designed to be accepted by will be done involuntarily or automatically? Then if I say they will be saved with their will, my reason replies, “How can they be saved if they will not give in?” So the ultimate judgment is pronounced that evil and judgment against God must have their final sentence.

One of the great heroic stories, probably of all times, comes from the second century before Christ when the Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanes came into the holy land, into Jerusalem and took the Jewish temple, desecrated it by turning the temple into a brothel and offering pigs on the altar of sacrifice. It was a time for heroes. A group of people zealous for their faith, the Maccabees, rose and with a small force overthrew the mighty Antiochus Epiphanes who in the book of Daniel becomes a type of the end-time ruler. Why were the Maccabees so concerned? Why did they resist what Antiochus had done? Because the temple, something that was holy, had been desecrated and profaned and honor required that it be restored to its function. God in His moral purity sees the earth as His temple. The earth is the temple of the Lord. Individually we are designed to be His temple as well. When that temple has become desecrated and those who are the caretakers of the temple choose not to do anything about the desecration, God himself moves in to cleanse His temple. God has vast power at His disposal.

All of us are on a kind of floating space ship. Scripture says there’s going to come a day when the heavens and the earth will melt with a fervent heat. And God himself will create a new heaven and new earth. He wants to bring with Him in that new heaven and new earth a people who are a new people, called by His name who have voluntarily given their lives to Him.

Revelation invites us through Revelation 16 to only know the wrath of God from a literature point of view and not from an experiential point of view. It’s there that we’ll read it and be warned. But it’s not there that we will experience it. It’s that we might be warned thereby and

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escape the wrath of God. Why should we serve God? Because we want to escape His wrath? I'm not sure that's a very good motive for worshipping God. I think God will accept it. God is humble enough to even accept we want to escape hell so we'll serve Him. But the real thing we want to do is having been warned of the wrath of God to recognize that in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ we have God's love which He has chosen to elevate above His wrath. His wrath is judicial. It's not angry like we think of human anger. But He has chosen to have all of those who would call upon Him be saved.

Every time we look at Revelation, it's forcing us like the seminars on the Titanic to say "Are you ready for the collision?" If you're ready for the collision then we can get on to maximizing human potential in life. But don't try to maximize potential until you're ready to meet God. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. It is a marvelous thing to be supported by the hands of Jesus Christ in the presence of the living God.

Closing Prayer

Salvation has come. We praise You for that, O God. That we who as human beings judicially were under the sentence of Your law for we have violated Your law and Your sentence is "the soul that sinneth shall die." We who have come to You have accepted that sentence and we have not tried to stand before You in our unrighteousness nor commend ourselves to You on the basis that we have even kept 90 percent of the law or more. But we have recognized that in one failure of Your law there has entered into our life the seed of evil, which prevents us from enjoying an eternity of full life and joy of freedom from evil in Your presence. You who pass sentence on us for our sins, "the soul that sinneth shall die," have allowed another principle to be at work in Your universe that has said, "The soul that is righteous shall make all live" and we praise You that Jesus bore the penalty of our death and in His righteousness and all who come to him are

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made alive. We praise You today for salvation and we pray Lord Jesus that as we go about our daily affairs of life and live as citizens that we will do so with a humility and awe before You. That we'll not tread lightly upon Your grace. But that we will be able to say with the wonder of the hymn writer of *Amazing Grace*, "...how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." Father, there are persons here this morning who have not received You into their lives. You come with warning. That warning is based upon Your great love, for You alone know what it is like to live in eternity without Your presence. You love each of us so much that You gave Yourself for us. Help each person here, Lord, to know that it's not Your design that any of us ever experience Your wrath. But that all of us would know the mercy and the love of the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.