

Revelation 15-16
God will judge
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Thomas Jefferson, governor of Virginia, US minister to France, US secretary of state under George Washington, vice-president in the administration of John Adams, president of the United States from 1801 to 1809, author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom, Father of the University of Virginia architect, naturalist, and linguist was not daft.

But his verdict on the book of Revelation was that it was: *"the ravings of a maniac, no more worthy, nor capable of explanation than the incoherencies of our own nightly dreams."*

Personally I would have thought that if Jefferson had nightly dreams even vaguely like anything in Revelation on a regular basis he should have been seeking some kind of assistance for his mental health rather than running a country.

But Jefferson is by no means the only person who has found the book of Revelation difficult, not to say incomprehensible.

The reason many people, especially through the last couple of hundred years, have struggled to understand this book is, fundamentally, that its literary type or, to use the technical term, genre, is not one that we commonly see in our own culture.

We are familiar with the different literary conventions of the recipe book, the detective novel and the political satire, to name but three, but not at all familiar with the highly symbolic, picture language that is used in the apocalyptic book of Revelation, and indeed was widely used in all sorts of other apocalyptic books from 600BC onwards in the Jewish world.

Typically what this means is that people try and impose the standards of other types of literature onto the book of Revelation and end up interpreting it in ways that the apostle John, Jesus' closest earthly friend and the writer of this series of visions, would have found totally incomprehensible.

Typically what happens on the thousands of web sites, written by sincere Bible believing Christian people, is that the book of Revelation is subjected to highly speculative and specific reconstructions in a vain attempt to tell us what is going to happen in the future.

So, writing about the gathering together of the kings at a place called Armageddon in 16:16 one web site tells us, with an entirely straight face, that this battle will actually take place soon, on a specific plain in Northern Israel and that the mass of humanity will be deceived by the media into thinking that the attacking forces are actually aliens coming from outer space.

And we wonder why people think Christians are weird!

All this of course would be funny if it weren't so tragic. It's tragic because the book of Revelation, and perhaps particularly the section of it that we are looking at this morning, has a very real, very powerful and very solemn message for the human race. And it's a message that is not just for a select number of people who happen to be living at one moment in history when certain events take place.

As you'll know if you've been with us for the rest of this series in the book of Revelation, this book gives us a series of different perspectives on all of history and teaches us about God's dealings with us, not just for one generation, but in every generation.

But first we have to deal with the small problem that the very first verse of chapter 15 seems to say something completely different from what I've just told you!

1 God's 7 "last" judgments...

V1. Surely this indicates that what we've been saying about Revelation all along is wrong that that what we have here is some sort of chronological sequence with these final plagues or judgments coming at the end of time?

Well for two reasons I think not:

Firstly because there are some pretty striking similarities between these plagues and the judgments that followed the 7 trumpet blasts back in chapters 8-13 – and it would be a bit odd if God simply repeated himself.

And secondly because everybody agrees that even these 7 "last" judgments don't actually include the "last" of final judgment – the eternal destruction of the dragon, his beasts

and all who follow them in the lake of fire that we'll come to in chapter 20.

So what on does it mean that these judgments we are about to see are the last plagues? Well as so often in Revelation the answer is that we need to think in terms of the book. These are the last plagues in the sense that when we have read this section we will have seen all of God's judgments in time that we are going to see.

There will still be some details to fill in – next week we'll hear more about the so-called battle of Armageddon and the destruction of Babylon – and we still need to know about the eternal punishment of the beast and those who receive his mark. But when we have read these chapters we will have seen all of God's judgments in time that there are going to be.

These chapters are not about some future judgment. They are about what God has been doing in our world for the last 2000 years and will carry on doing until the return of Christ, however long that may be.

So what does it look like to live in a world that is under God's righteous judgment?

It's a question that Christians have managed to answer in spectacularly wrong or insensitive ways over the centuries so to give a thoughtful, detailed and yet clear answer we're going to have to look at two Old Testament passages that form the background to this passage in Revelation.

The first of these is found in the book of Exodus and runs from Exodus 7 to Exodus 10.

In these chapters we learn see God sending a series of terrifying judgments on the people of Egypt because the Egyptians would not let God's people, the Israelites be free – they insisted on keeping them in terrible slavery.

So God wrought his terrible, but entirely just, judgment on Egypt and its people in 10 plagues. Some of these plagues would be very familiar to anybody who has read Revelation 15-16 – boils, darkness, blood, hail and frogs. During all these plagues, some of which affected the physical health and some the economic prosperity of the Egyptians, the Israelites, living in a separate part of Egypt called Goshen, were physically protected from God's judgments. God's people were exempted, protected, kept safe.

Eventually God lead his people out of Egypt in the Exodus and the pursuing Egyptian army was utterly destroyed in the Red Sea – much

as the armies of the kings of the earth are destroyed in the battle of Armageddon in Rev 19 as we'll see next time. Egypt, an arrogant empire, stood against God's people and was destroyed by God's judgment while his people were protected.

The bowls of God's wrath, John tells us in Revelation 16, will be just like the plagues on Egypt. Not that we should expect boils and blood and darkness and lots of sunburn and frogs. Those are just the images. What will happen is that God will bring down evil empires through war or famine or economic pressure as they reject him in their arrogance and pride.

He does it to those empires that avowedly hate him – to Alexander the Great and Atilla the Hun and Fascism and Communism. And he does it too to those Empires that take his name and claim Christian virtue but are truly selfish, rapacious and arrogant – the later Roman empire, the Spanish, the British and, one day without a shadow of a doubt, to western consumerist Europe and America. God brings vengeance and judgment on a world that hates him and his people.

But the astute among you will have noticed that there is a flaw here! I mean it was all very well for the Israelites stuck out in Goshen to sit and watch while God judged the wicked Egyptians. But sadly most of the rest of the history of the world is not so neat is it?

After all when Rome fell to the Goths the Christian believers got slaughtered along with the pagans. The cannon fodder conscripts of Hitler and Stalin's armies got machine gunned down in Stalingrad whether they were born again or not. Iraqi Christians can be killed by British bombs just as easily as Saddam's henchmen. When a Tsunami strikes surely it does so indiscriminate of whether people follow the one true God or not?

Well of course John is not stupid. He knows that in a fallen world Christians are not immune from famine or from war.

Which is why it's important that Ezekiel 9 is also part of the background to these chapters in Revelation.

Let's turn that up now. Ezekiel 9:1-11. I'm sure you're struck by the immediate similarities with Revelation – marks on people, angels in linen and so on. What happens in this passage in Ezekiel is that God's judgment is poured out on those who refuse to recognise that he is the true God. He judges idolatry. And all who grieve and

lament over idolatry and wickedness – all those who share God’s feelings about it – in other words all of God’s people, every believer, is safe.

That’s what happens in the vision. What happened in history in Ezekiel’s day is that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged the city. He ground it down and then took it – slaughtering with discrimination. And of course in that historical battle many genuine believers died along with the idolaters. Ezekiel knew that. John certainly knew it. But that does not make the vision untrue.

Rather it means that it is fulfilled at a more profound level than simply what happens in time. In the end, as we will see over the next few weeks in Revelation, none of God’s people are lost. They are all rescued forever with God in glory. And in the end none of those with the mark of the beast; no one who refuses to honour and worship the Lord Jesus Christ, will escape God’s judgment. They may prosper for a time, even for a lifetime, but God will call everyone to account.

What does it look like to live in a world that is under God’s judgment?

Well what it is not is neat. In God’s sovereign control he has decided that in our world his judgments on economies, nations and communities affect believers and unbelievers alike. But that does not mean that these things are accidents or out of God’s control. Not at all. They remain his just and perfect judgments.

They are warning sounds, calling on Christians to continue to trust and on non-Christians to repent of their rejection of the living God.

And what may be even more startling to us is why God brings these judgments...

2 Because his people cry out for them

God brings his judgments on the world not, in one sense, entirely on his own, but in response to the cries of his people for justice.

There are two clues that show us this in the passage.

Firstly, if you’ve been with us for other parts of our series in Revelation you may remember that the bowls from which God’s judgments are poured on the earth are not the first bowls we have seen in this book.

Right back in chapter 5:8 we saw bowls full of incense which were what? They were the prayers of the saints. Now Revelation does not use its images idly. There is clearly meant to be some sort of connection between these two sets of bowls. One wouldn’t want to make too much of it but it does at least suggest, doesn’t it, that God’s judgment on the world is at least in part his response to the prayers of his people – of us! Christians should not be surprised when terrible things happen in the world. The Lord Jesus told us that famines and earthquakes and disasters would mark the whole period of the incoming of the kingdom. The whole time from his first to his second coming.

And he instructed us to pray that his kingdom would come. SO when we see these things happening it is at least in part God’s judgment of a wicked world in answer to our prayers.

Now that does not mean that when these things happen we should not send aid, send money, go and share the gospel, preach good news and pray for relief for those suffering the world’s disasters. Of course we should do those things. God himself grieves over the suffering of all people, Christian or not. But we must recognise that in a world that has rejected a holy and just God judgment is exactly what we should expect to see.

The second clue that these judgments come in response to the prayers of God’s people is in 16:7. Where the altar responds “Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.” I don’t know if you’ve ever come across a talking altar. I imagine they’re quite unusual. In fact probably this one is unique! But we have heard voices from the altar before in Revelation. In 6:9-10 to be precise:

John sees "under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, " How long Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?""

Chapters 15 and 16 are God’s answer to that cry. God is a God of justice. The terrible acts that have been perpetrated against Christian people over the centuries will be justly righted.

But there is another reason why God acts in judgment:

3 God’s judgments bring him glory

15:3b-4. As God judges the world, the Bible says, his justice is seen.

Maybe you find that really difficult to accept this morning. I think probably everybody finds this a hard teaching of the Bible. And actually the passage prepares us for finding this a hard teaching.

We learn in v4 that God alone is holy. His standard, his justice, is infinitely more perfect than ours.

And God's justice is seen in his judgment. There was a Garry Larson cartoon that had God watching people on a TV monitor and his finger was held poised over a button in front of him; and on the button was written the word 'Smite'. Some feel talk of God's judgment portrays a God like that, just waiting to smite people. That's not what we're talking about. That is not the God of the Bible. Think of the Lord Jesus Christ as he went towards Jerusalem to die so that people might be reconciled to God. What did he say?

'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I've longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.'

As God said to the prophet Ezekiel:

I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.

And God calls to people:

'Turn, turn from your evil ways. Why will you die?'

God's great desire is that people should repent of their rebellion and take him up on his offer of life. But that does not mean that he will not judge. And the final tragedy of this passage is that...

4 Humanity will not repent

V9. People know in their hearts that the disasters that have fallen are God's judgment. But rather than repent and glorify God they curse his name.

Is that not exactly what we see around us all the time?

Following the Tsunami in Asia there were plenty of people – from ordinary folk in shops and offices to national newspaper journalists – who were quite willing to blame God and curse him for what had happened.

Plenty who were happy to ask why God would do such a thing. But very few who would even begin to ask whether perhaps God's attitude to the world might not have something to do with the world's attitude to God.

And this happens not once, or twice but three times in this passage:

16:10: 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.

16:21 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.

In fact in 16:16 the kings of the earth – the rulers representing the people of this world, gather together because in their pride and arrogance they actually think that they can defeat God. Like the builders of the tower of Babel these masters of the universe think that they can stage a corporate takeover of heaven itself.

God will make peace with anyone who turns from their sin and trusts in Jesus Christ, the lamb. But that is exactly what these people refuse to do. Instead they curse God and take a final stand against him.

What is it like to live in a world under God's judgment?

Well it's a terrible thing because we see something of the just consequences of our wickedness. And they are awful. But it's also a wonderful opportunity. It is not yet too late to turn from sin and trust God.

God's final and absolute wrapping up of world history, his last judgment, has not yet come.

If you are a Christian here this morning, if you have accepted God's forgiveness in Christ, then rejoice that no judgment of God can possibly affect your eternity. You are perfectly rescued forever by what Jesus has done on the cross.

If you are a Christian here this morning this passage tells us that it is urgent to tell others about God's love and grace in Christ and to and urge them to accept it today, before the last act.

If you are not a Christian here this morning then I fully respect that you may find it difficult to understand God's judgment – especially if you do not accept that you, and

everyone else, has by nature, rejected God and rebelled against his goodness, his moral standards and his love.

But the fact you find it hard to accept does not mean that God's judgment is not real.

And the only way to escape it is to run. Not away from God, but into his arms.

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