

The Judgments of God

Revelation 15:5-16:21

This morning we come to one of the most reviled teachings in all of Scripture, at least to our surrounding world. In his book *The Reason for God* Tim Keller states, "In our culture, divine judgment is one of Christianity's most offensive doctrines."

The modern Western world is sincerely and deeply offended by the idea that the God of heaven will one day judge this world and cast people into an eternal hell for their sins. It simply doesn't make sense.

There are several reasons for this, but perhaps the primary reason is that the western world has replaced God with the individual self at the center of things. The chief end of man is not to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Rather the chief end of man is to live an authentic, self-willed life. An "authentic life" is the life you choose, the life you will, the life you desire. God has nothing to do with it. And it feels profoundly unfair to the modern man to think that you may live your life authentically – doing as you chose to do, making your own way and determining your own truth – only to find at the end, that because you failed to do things God's way, he sends you to an eternal hell. I mean, who IS this God and what in the world makes him think he has the RIGHT to stand as judge over my "authentic," self-willed, freely chosen life? Who does he think he is?

The answer, of course, is "He is God." These chapters press down upon our God-denying world the simple, unavoidable, overwhelming weight and reality of God. Our text this morning is specifically about God's judgement on this world.

I. The Judgement of God

We have been noting the judgments of God ever since chapter 6. If you remember, in chapter 6 we read of the 7 seals, in chapter 8 we read of the 7 trumpets, and now we have the 7 bowls. Each series of 7 tell the same story – the works of God in human history as he rescues his own and judges his enemies. But here in the 7 bowls we've come to the "final" acts of God. The 7 bowls are symbols of God's final judgement on the world. In 15:1 we are told, "with them the wrath of God is finished."

There are 3 things to see concerning God's judgments.

A. They Are Personal

This judgement is personal. The text makes clear that the terrible things we read here are *from* God.

1. The bowls are bowls of **God's** wrath.

15:7 And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever...

16:1 Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, "Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God."

These bowls represent his personal response to evil.

2. The angels specifically ascribe these judgements to God in a song of praise:

*16:5 And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, "Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for **you brought** these judgments."*

Nothing in this text seeks to protect God from the charge of being a God of judgment and wrath. Everything in this text supports the charge.

There is an increasing tendency in our day to define God as only love – with the clear implication that he not a God of wrath or judgement. Of course, our Heavenly Father is love – he loves his own glory, he loves his Son, he loves his Creation and he loves his elect children. And it is precisely because of his great love for these things that that he vows to punish everything that opposes or seeks to destroy these things! It is **because** he is a loving God that his wrath is personal against his enemies. He means this. These judgments originate from his heart and according to his purpose.

B. They Are Just

Tim Challies points out that people misunderstand the wrath of God because they assume it is like human anger:

*"Too many people associate God's wrath with human anger which, indeed, is often arbitrary and mean. The truth is that God's wrath is always the wrath of God as **Judge**. Thus, God's wrath is always a measured, just, judicial wrath."*

Consequently, when we think of the wrath of God we should not think primarily in terms of an emotion, but a judicial stance. God does not have emotions in the way that we do – he doesn't lose his temper. His holy wrath is not a matter of God lashing out in anger. It is much, much more frightening than that. The wrath of God is his unwavering, unremitting, irrevocable, omnipotent commitment to punish evil with justice. This is the re-occurring theme of the songs of saints and angels. Notice the song of the saints in **15:3**:

"Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations."

In chapter 16 we find the angels in verses 5 and 7 worshiping God for the justice of his character (v. 5) and his judgments (v. 7). *"True and just are your judgments."*

The word "just" means that God's judgements are "righteous" – it's the same word. In other words, his judgements are in perfect keeping with his perfectly holy and infinitely righteous character. In every way and to every degree, God's acts of judgement fulfill every aspect and standard of justice. No one, not even the Devil himself, can accuse God of being "unjust" in his judgements.

If you visit a prison or jail, it won't be very long before you find yourself talking to someone who believes that they have not been treated fairly; that in their case there was some error, some failure of justice. And, unfortunately, they are sometimes correct. Human courts are far from infallible. There are undoubtedly people in prison who have a right to complain. But there will not be a single person in hell who does. The "justice" of God's judgments are rooted in the perfection of his own being and are perfectly just.

C. They Are True

His judgments are not merely just they are "true." Sinclair Ferguson points out that the word "true" means that God's punishments are not only according to his perfect will but are also in perfect accord with the evil that has been done. This is seen clearly in the text.

Notice, in verses 2-4 we read of the first 3 bowls:

16:2-4 So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image. 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 in the sea. The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood.

Water is necessary for life. Blood is the symbol of death. And God's judgement of blood is in perfect keeping to the crimes of the condemned.

16:5 "Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!"

Blood for blood. God's wrath is always in perfect relation and proportion to the nature and severity of the sin. In **Romans 2:5**, Paul says clearly,

"He will give to each one according to what he has done."

J.I. Packer: "The explicit presupposition of all that we find in the Bible (concerning the experience of God's wrath)...is that each receives precisely what he deserves."

Notice who receives these bowls of wrath: they are all covered with guilt.

16:2 the people *“who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.”*

16:6 those who *“have shed the blood of God’s saints and God’s prophets.”*

16:10 *“the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast”*

16:19 the wrath of the 7th bowl falls on Babylon, the *“mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations”* (17:5); she is *“drunk with the blood of the saints”* (17:6).

Eric Alexander: “The judgement of God is not primarily intended to reform or even restrain sin. It is primarily intended to **reward** sin with what it deserves.”

A chief part of the misery of eternal hell will be the knowledge that the torment is deserved. The unrepentant sinner will carry the weight of that awful knowledge: “I earned this. The torment is true. It is in perfect, irrefutable accord to what I have done.” This is the reality of God’s judgement. It is personal. It is just. It is true.

II. The Response of the Condemned

16:8-11 *The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory. The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds.*

The plagues mentioned here are nearly identical to the plagues God brought against Egypt in the book of Exodus. Again, these are pictures of judgment, painted with the colors of the OT. But just as in Moses’ day, the judgements of God did not bring Pharaoh to repentance, but only hardened his heart against God. He suffered the just penalty for his rebellion. But no matter how much he suffered, he would not repent! You see the same thing following the 7th bowl.

16:21 *And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people; and they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe.*

Here we see the intransigent, binding power of pure evil. To be “intransigent” is to refuse to change one’s views. In a morally sensitive and sane world, wicked men and women would be willing to consider whether or not the judgements from God were warranted by anything they might be doing or not doing. But evil cannot and will not repent – no matter the cost.

- Notice, in the judgements of these bowls, no one questions that this is the direct act of God. There are no atheists or agnostics on judgement day.

- Neither do men protest that this is unfair. No one is asking “Why?” They know why. They know that God is judging them for their sin.

But rather than acknowledge Him as God and repent of their idolatry, they enter into eternal hell blaspheming and cursing God.

Why? Because that is the nature of evil. Evil is not, at heart, a failure to what is right. Evil, at heart, is a desire to defy God. As Augustine confessed many centuries ago – the thrill of stealing the pear wasn’t in gaining the pear but in transgressing the commandment. The thrill of sexual perversion isn’t about nerve endings, it’s about physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional rebellion against God. The “high” isn’t the sex, it’s the idolatry. And those who worship the beast become like the beast and will enter hell with the beast.

III. The Ways of God

We don’t have time this morning to fully unravel the battle we see in verses 12-17. This battle is taken up again in chapters 17-19 and so, Lord-willing we will have a chance to unfold it more thoroughly then. But there are just a few key things I’d like us to see this morning.

A. Redemption is Warfare

The picture painted for us in verse 12ff is a picture of armies assembling for battle. The dragon, beast, and false prophet spew out demonic spirits who *“go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty...And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon” (16:14, 16).*

The 6th and 7th bowls point to a great, final demonic attack against the kingdom and people of God. The kings of this world stand for the powers of this dark and evil age; all the political, economic, religious, and social forces this world arrayed against the people of God. I think we are starting to get a sense of what that looks and feels like as we see the increasing alignment of economic, political, and social forces aggressively promoting the devastating deceptions of the Devil and the beast.

Armageddon is literally “the mount Megiddo.” Megiddo was well known to the saints of old. It is actually a valley to the north of Jerusalem and was the de facto battle ground of Israel. All through the OT you see Israel battling its enemies in the valley of Megiddo. Armageddon, then, represents the great, spiritual battleground where the enemies of God attack his church. We are living in Armageddon. The battle is on. But we need not fear. Victory is near.

Notice, when the 6th angel pours out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, its waters are dried up. We are told that this is “to prepare the way for the kings from the east.” In other words, the kings of this world gather together to assault the church – and it looks like all obstacles have been removed.

This is certainly meant to remind us of Israel’s exodus out of Egypt! Pharaoh pursued the people of God, and the waters dried up; a path opened up. The Red Sea parted, and the armies of Pharaoh rushed in – certain that they were mere moments away from utterly destroying the helpless Israelites. And then God brought the waters crashing over their heads and they were all swept away in the flood of God’s divine judgment.

That’s what we will see happening in the following chapters. That’s the comfort and courage we need for today. As the world increases its attacks on the church, all they will see are open doors and removed obstacles. They will rush in to wage their war against Christ. But they are rushing to their destruction and the just wrath of God.

B. A Word for the Church

In the midst of this vision, Jesus speaks directly to us, to his church:

16:15 (*“Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!”*)

Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, wants us to understand that the greatest danger we face is not persecution but spiritual apathy. The greatest threat to our eternal happiness is not martyrdom – it’s apathy and accommodation. It is perfectly possible to spend your life in the presence of the truths of God, but spiritually drowsy so that they don’t take root; there’s no power in it because you are not laying hold of it. And so this passing world and its ways is appealing and comforting – it feels like home. And when persecution comes, you won’t be able to stand. You simply won’t be able to lose the things you love for Someone you don’t. And on the day of judgement, you will be lost. Your body may have been in the house of God, but your heart was in the world.

What is the power that is able to keep us awake; turn us away from the lies we’ve believed and the idolatrous loves we’ve embraced? What is able to free us from the power of evil and deliver us safely to the kingdom of God?

Rom. 1:16 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

Faith is the victory that overcomes the world. Faith in what? Faith in the gospel.

You see, the gospel is God's miraculous mercy to sinners under just judgment. The wrath of God isn't a reality for "other people" – it is a reality for all people. We are, by nature, objects of wrath (Eph. 2:2). In other words, by nature, according to what we are by birth and by Adam, we were the people under the sentence of divine judgment. And that sentence was just and true.

***Eph. 2:4-5** But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.*

How did he do that? Jesus, the perfect Son of God, came to earth, took on himself the guilt of our sins, and willingly placed himself under the wrath of God. All the fury you see in Revelation 16 was poured out on him. He became the condemned. He took the cup of wrath, the bowl of divine judgement, due to us, and drank it. God poured out his holy wrath upon his own Son – and in so doing poured out his holy love upon us.

Sinclair Ferguson points out that there are two cups in the hands of God: the cup of blessing and the cup of wrath. And every person here in this room will drink one or the other. If you stay asleep, dead to God, and abounding in your sin, you will experience the horrors of Revelation 16 in your own person. Going to church and believing certain biblical truths will not save you. Only Jesus can. You must turn to him in faith and repentance.

And because Jesus drank the cup of judgement, we, the sinner, can drink the cup of blessing. Instead of drinking the death of divine judgement, we can drink the life-giving wine signifying the new covenant in his blood. This can break the power of sin. Jesus bore all the wrath of Revelation 16, bearing your sin so that you and I can enjoy all the glory of Revelation 21 and 22, robed in his righteousness. He was cursed so we could be forever blest. Let that change your life – forever. Amen.