

Three aspects of God's judgement in Revelation

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Readings: Revelation 5:6-10, 7:9-12, 11:15-19, 15:1-4

The vision of chapters 4&5 sets the mood for the rest of the book. Everything that happens from now on happens before and under the supervision and control of the Father on His throne, and we need to understand and interpret everything in the light of His sovereign rule through the risen Lamb and the Spirit (Who is before the throne and Who is sent out into all the world.)

1. Jesus the Lamb has authority to take the scroll of human destiny and to open he seals. All of the Judgements come from the hand of the Lamb - 'The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father.' John 5:22-23.
2. The Lamb who administers the judgement bears in himself the permanent marks of judgement - He is the Lamb who was slain. He is not only our Judge, but the one who has been judged for us as our saviour, and so all of His judgements are part of his action of salvation - *whenever Jesus appears in Revelation after chapter 5, He is accompanied by His people whom He has redeemed. He will not be known alone, but only as the one who has redeemed a people for himself.*
3. All that the Lamb does us ultimately to bring glory to His Father - over and over through Revelation the focus shifts back to the Throne and we see all of His people and creation worshipping Him.

A perspective on God's judgement

The sevenfold judgements we will see in the three sevens of seals, trumpets and bowls present to us three angles on God's judgement - not three different types of judgement, for God's action of judgement is one. Rather it achieves three goals:

1. To choose, separate and purify a people for Himself.
2. To call sinners to flee to the Lamb in repentance and faith.
3. To finally vindicate His own name by dealing conclusively with all rebellion, evil and injustice.

Each seven is not necessarily a chronological account, but a composite picture that builds up a full image. The three sevens seen together then give us a 'Three dimensional' picture of God's action of judgement.

Chapter 6: The Seals - The Judgement of Hope

As the Lamb undoes each seal, the scroll is allowed to open bit by bit, and the judgements within are brought to bear on the world - yet it is a judgement of hope *a la* Romans 8:20-12: The creation was subjected to frustration (futility, self-destructiveness - ie judgement) because of sin, but it was in hope - it is through this judgement that creation will be liberated from bondage to decay and brought into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God. If the creation (including us) is going to come into the freedom of truly being how God created it to be, it must first pass through judgement. This judgement is one of God handing us over to the depravity and consequences of our suppression of the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18, 24, 26, 28) - the revelation of God's wrath (Rom 1:18) in this present age.

4 horses - a pretty accurate summary of a human race handed over to our sinfulness.

Seal 1 (1-2) White horse

A conqueror bent on conquest. What is the history of mankind, if not the never ending cycle of nation conquering nation, of people striving for power over others, and enforcing their rule in oppressive regimes? Human nature wants to conquer, and God's judgement is to hand us over to the consequences of this drive.

Seal 2 (3-4) Fiery red horse

Power to take peace from the earth. There has never been a time in history when there has not been a war being fought somewhere in the world. Popular culture offers vain hopes of the world living at peace, if only people will learn to love each other. This will never happen in this age, not only because it goes against fallen human nature, but because God's judgement is to hand us over to the outworking of our hatred.

Seal 3 (5-6) Black horse

Famine & drought. (*1 quart of wheat - enough to make 1 or 2 of our loaves of bread (or 3 quarts of less nutritious barley)- cost a day's wages - equivalent to \$250 today. Figs and vines are drought resistant, so special care would be taken of them, as that is all that may be left after a severe drought.*) There is enough food produced in the world to feed the whole world population - the problem is distribution. God's judgement is to hand us over to the outworking of our greed.

Seal 4 (7-8) Pale horse

Death and Hades. Have you survived or escaped the first three judgements? You will by no means escape the 4th! The 4th horse in a way sums up the first 3 - this world is characterised by and seems to be under the dominion of death. The wages of sin is death - not just the termination of life at the end, but the ongoing decay, pain, sadness and weakness that death brings into everyone's life. God's judgement is to hand us over to the devastating reality of sin's destructive power.

Seal 5 (9-11)

Where are God's people in all of this? Are we exempt from these judgements? V.9 not a select few, but a picture of the church as a whole. This is written to people facing violent and severe persecution. Millions of Christians have died at the hands of their persecutors: those who are living under the wrath of God and who have been given over to their sin by Him. So God does not withdraw His people from this judgement of Hope; instead, He allows us to go through it, because this is the way He refines and purifies His people, and brings them to maturity. The Saints - while kept safe under the altar - know the pain and groaning that the whole world is under, yet their hope is not a vain one - they know that the time will arrive when the final judgement will come and they will be vindicated. In the meantime their cry is, 'How long will it be, Lord?' There is both a pain and a comfort, knowing that the pain is but for a time.

Seal 6 (6:12 - 7:17)

The sixth seal speaks of last days, preceding the 'great and glorious day of the Lord' spoken of by Joel (Joel 2:28-32), which, as Peter declares to the crowd on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36), began with the coming of the Spirit to bring the full reality of Jesus' death and resurrection to his people and the world.

John's description of the sixth seal's opening is remarkably similar to Joel's prophecy. This is what makes the judgements of the seals judgements of hope - they are not divorced from the good news that the decay and futility inherent in the world has a purpose, and God is bringing everything to a point where this curse will reach its climax and end. While this is good news to those who receive the Gospel, and especially to those who have directly faced the fallout of the curse and been martyred, it is in no way good news to those who reject the truth and choose to live in and under the curse. To them, the cross speaks only of judgement. Many people, upon hearing the Gospel, cannot get past the fact of their sin and the judgement of God that is upon them. By refusing to accept their accountability to God, they fail to recognise that the news of the atoning death of Jesus is good news, for why should One die for people who are not guilty? All people, regardless of their status or social standing, work hard at fleeing from this accountability, and they hide in the caves and rocks of the mountains of their own achievements and self righteousness; they build up social, spiritual and political structures that they think will keep them safe from God's wrath.

What a wonderful, freeing thing it is to come under the wrath of the Lamb! The Lamb is a symbol of meekness, humility and gentleness; to come under His wrath is to face the fire of His judgement upon all that is impure, unholy, unclean and sinful, and to be purged of all of this, and be brought down into the death of his own cross, so that we might be brought back to a life that is holy, pure, clean and free from sin. The wrath of the Lamb is the wrath of holy love; a judgement of hope,

because it restores us to become children of God. The news of this judgement is good news to anyone who accepts it; any man who flees from that wrath is a fool, even though he may be a king.

Chapter 7

1-8

In the sixth seal is the fulfilment of the promise given to the martyrs under the altar - the completion of the people of God.

John first hears the number of God's people: 144 000 - this speaks of completion (12x12x1000), the number is round and exact, symbolic of the totality of God's people throughout the ages who, through faith are members of the true Israel.

9-17

John now looks to see this 144000, and sees not a literally defined number, but a great, *uncountable* multitude from every nation, tribe, people and tongue. This is the same group he heard described in 3-8; the same as those who were under the altar in 6:9, for they are wearing the white robes given to them (6:11). Those who appeared defeated (yet safe) in the midst of these judgements are now seen to be in a place of victory; like those on the day of Jesus' 'triumphal procession' into Jerusalem they are heralding their King, as one who has returned from victory in war. Their mourning has been turned into songs of joy! Their cry is no longer, 'How long, Lord?', but, 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!'

If you feel that you are among the broken and slain under the altar; a victim of the dangers of this fallen world and a fallen humanity, know that you are also numbered among the great multitude, standing before the throne of God! You are not subject to the powers of men, but you are set free to serve God; you do not need to fear the ravages of war, for you are safe in the tent of the King; you do not need to fear the threat of famine and drought, because your real food is the word of God and your real drink is the Spirit Who lives in you; and your greatest enemy, death, is defeated in the Lamb, the Good shepherd who has laid down His life for His sheep - in Him is eternal life. You can know for sure now that every tear you have cried in this world will be dried as God Himself holds you in His embrace.

Seal 7 (8:1)

What does this silence mean?

1. The silence of rest. All the turmoil of the world caught up in sin has been brought to an end; this is a picture of the Sabbath, when all is at peace.
2. The silence of listening. The next thing that happens is the prayers of the saints being offered as incense. All heaven is silent because the Father is listening to the prayers of His people!
3. The silence of waiting. The seven angels with trumpets take their place ready to sound them; it is as if all creation is hushed in anticipation to see what happens when they do.

Chapter 8: The Trumpets - The Judgement of Mercy

The trumpets are a crystal clear warning of the final judgement that is coming, and to call people to repentance. None of these judgements are complete - they only affect a third of what they attack. They are a demonstration of God's patience in forbearing the sin of mankind while He gives us opportunities to repent; they also demonstrate the willfulness of sinful human beings, since drastic measures such as judgements are needed to break through the hardness of our hearts. Romans 2:4: These judgements are acts of kindness, since they are not complete - it is complete judgement that the human race truly deserves. 'It is because of the Lord's great love that we are not consumed' (Lamentations 3:20).

1-6

The first four trumpets use imagery from Exodus, specifically the plagues upon Egypt. These plagues were sent upon Egypt so that, 'The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch

out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it.' (Exodus 7:5). God repeats a number of times through the Exodus story that all He is doing is so that people may know Him for Who He is. Like the seals, the trumpets are not necessarily chronological, but build up a chorus of a fanfare.

Trumpet 1 (7)

Judgement of hail & fire upon the earth. (Exodus 9:13-35)

Trumpet 2 (8-9)

Judgement of blood upon the seas. (Exodus 7:14-24, esp. 17).

Trumpet 3 (10-11)

Judgement of bitterness upon the fresh water. (Exodus 15:22-27).

Trumpet 4 (12-13)

Judgement of darkness upon the heavenly bodies. (Exodus 10:21-29)

The Eagle announces the next three trumpets - three woes for three trumpets. As we follow these 3 woes, we see an unusual progression, where the focus moves from the spiritual darkness on earth to the spiritual light and victory of God and his people; Jesus' concern is that we understand our position and role in regard to these judgements of mercy.

Chapter 9

Trumpet 5 (1-12)

The power of Satan. He is *given* the keys to the Abyss - the realm of the demonic and of Satan's army (cf. Luke 8:31), but he does not possess these keys by right - he can only possess and use them insofar as God allows him to. Satan has the power of death (Hebrews 2:14), but he does not have power *over* death, and as such is himself subject to death's power, which in turn is subject to Christ. The torment (5) brought by the stings of the locusts is the spiritual agony of living life as a contradiction - knowing on one hand that I am made to be in relationship with God, yet trying on the other to desperately run as far away from Him as I can, and in doing so being painfully dysfunctional as a person. Yet this spiritual oppression is limited in power and time - only five months are given (the normal life span of a locust). As locust plagues are seasonal, and intermittent, so too is the power of Satan. God allows him to work from time to time to accomplish God's purpose, but he never gains ascendancy, and so his work is yet another of these judgements of mercy God gives to unbelievers.

Trumpet 6 (9:13-11:14)

9:13-20

The power of death & the offer of life. As with the sixth seal (and sixth bowl), **the sixth trumpet gives us insight into the place and role of God's people in the midst of these judgements of mercy.**

The horns in v. 13 - A person facing certain death and punishment could flee to the altar and cling to the horns as a final plea for mercy (1 Kings 1:50-53, 2:28, cf. Amos 3:14), if not from their human judge, then from God Himself. The voice John hears from these horns is the voice of mercy, not final judgement.

We might struggle to see this as the voice of mercy, since this voice calls for the release of 200 000 000 troops to kill a third of mankind with the painful plagues of fire, smoke and sulphur. Is this merciful? We will see it is when we understand two things:

1. The death of the unrepentant is always tragic, but never unjust. God has declared that the entire human race stands under the sentence of death because of the guilt of their sin, and so if anything is incongruous it is that only a third of the human race dies instead of the whole.
2. The death of this third seems to be for the 'benefit' of the remaining two thirds - that by seeing this judgement upon idolatry and immorality they should be urged to repent. The focus here is not on those who died, but on those who remain and still have the opportunity to repent. It is an incredible mercy here that those practicing things which are described as detestable and

repulsive to God have judgement withheld for a time. God is truly '[bearing] with great patience the objects of His wrath - prepared for destruction.... to make the riches of His glory known to the objects of His mercy...' (Romans 9:22,23).

Chapter 10 - Proclaiming the covenant faithfulness of God.

1-7

In the midst of this climactic judgement of mercy, John sees the covenant faithfulness of God. The angel is clothed in a cloud, like Mt. Sinai; the fiery pillars that are its legs remind us of the two pillars of smoke and fire that led the Israelites to Sinai; The rainbow over the angel's head is the sign of God's faithfulness to all of creation - and so the angel straddles both the sea and the land - and the rainbow is a perpetual reminder to God Himself of His promise to redeem and restore the fallen world. This is the amazing mercy of God; the declaration of His grace towards unrepentant sinners resounds and echoes throughout creation like a thunderclap (3) - the God of all creation has made His promises and He will keep them without delay, and everything spoken of by the prophets will be completely fulfilled. And so the call to repent is an urgent one - the seventh trumpet is about to be sounded, heralding an end to the era of mercy.

8-11

John is called to take the scroll - the revelation of the nature of God and His covenant faithfulness - and eat it as if it were a piece of bread. This is a call to John to speak forth the Word of God - yet this Word of God, which to him is sweetness and goodness, becomes sour in the proclamation, because he is proclaiming to people with hard and stubborn hearts, who reject the word, and by doing so bring upon themselves judgement.

Chapter 11 - God's people in the midst of the judgement of mercy.

1-14

The role of the church in proclaiming this Word of repentance - the Gospel. John is called to measure the temple, in which is contained the worshippers, ie. the people of God, and all of them are counted, to ensure their safety and separateness from the judgements. Yet the outer courts are not to be included. These are the courts of the Gentiles, where people from any nation may come and pray and seek mercy from God.

The two witnesses (3) are a paradigm for the church's proclamation. Even if we see them as two literal future people, we still cannot avoid the significance of their description:

1. **They are clothed in sackcloth.** Sackcloth is the clothing of repentance and mourning. These witnesses have now outward show of triumphalism or domination, but instead are forgiven sinners who rely constantly on the grace of God both for their lives and ministry.
2. **They are called the two olive trees and two lampstands that stand before the Lord.** This is a reference to one of Zechariah's visions (Zechariah 4). The trees represented Joshua the High Priest and Zerubbabel the King of Judah whom God had anointed to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple and restore the worship. Together they also are a type of the Priest-King Messiah who would come and bring people to worship the Father in Spirit and truth (John 4:23). The essential message of these witnesses is therefore Christ.
3. **They have the same powers that were given to Elijah and Moses.** The witnesses' prophesying is in the same Spirit and tradition of Moses and Elijah, who are taken as representative of the Law and the Prophets - ie. the whole old Testament Scriptures which are culminated and fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus. So the Gospel the church proclaims is the 'whole counsel' of God.
4. **They are hated, persecuted and killed by the world.** This is the bitterness that John tasted when digesting the scroll, and the cost everyone must count when they answer the call to proclaim the Word...
5. **...But they live in hope of the resurrection.** Satan and the world may have been able to kill them physically, but they could not destroy them. They are resurrected, and hear the wonderful

words from the Father, 'Come up here!' If we follow Christ through the path of suffering, we will also follow Him into life and glory. This resurrection hope is what should inspire, motivate and empower our sharing of the Gospel.

6. **They are ultimately vindicated before the world.** God's vindication of the witnesses by raising them from death and sending the earthquake resulted in many acknowledging God, and giving Him glory! ***God's purpose in all these judgements of the trumpets, '...that they may know that I am the Lord.' has been accomplished, and accomplished through the testimony of His people!***

Trumpet 7 (11:15-19)

The final victory of God. This is the final vindication, not just of God's people (the prophets and saints), but of God Himself, when no-one will be able to say that He is not just or sovereign. It is the third 'Woe', as those who passed over their numerous opportunities to repent, to now stand and witness, from outside, God's people and all of heaven lifting their voices in worship to God! These words, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.' is summed up in three words: 'Jesus is Lord'. As we go and proclaim Jesus was are declaring His victory over sin, death and the devil; pointing them forward to this final day, and calling them to come, believe, and be included in the great crowd of God's people from all nations.

The Seven Bowls - The judgement of retribution

(14:14 - 16:21)

14:14-19

The bowls are a depiction of the final judgement of Jesus upon a sinful and impenitent world. It begins with a vision of Jesus, not as the redeeming Lamb, but as the Son of Man coming in the clouds to reap the final harvest. The final judgement is described in the Scriptures as a harvest, when God's children are revealed and vindicated, and the impenitent face their condemnation in which they lose any opportunity to ever turn back to God. We see this in the two actions of harvesting:

The first is a gathering of God's people (16), done by Christ at the bidding of the angel who is sent by the Father from the Temple; the harvest is of those whom God has chosen and called, and who have come to Him in faith.

The second harvest (18) - this time of the grapes, whose red juice is as vivid as blood, as the people they represent come under the wrath of God.

Chapter 15 - Seven Angels

1-4

We now see this action of God spelled out as the seven angels with seven bowls stand in line, waiting for their cue to pour out God's final judgement. In these judgements there is no more holding back; no more demonstrations of God's patience in waiting for people to repent.

5-8

His final judgement, as depicted in the clean, shining clothes of the 7 angels, is pure and holy and just; when it comes, there will be no ambiguity, no misunderstanding, not suggestion that God is not fair in His judgement. When the seventh bowl is poured out (16:17) we hear God's voice declare from the Throne 'It is done!' - *the judgement is complete*. This is the moment when every excuse one may have will be swept away and all humanity will stand naked before their Creator; when they will be confronted with the glory and power of His presence, yet at the same time unable to approach Him and join those beside His throne inside the Temple. What a terrible thing, to come face to face with a holy God, unable to flee, yet unable to approach.

Chapter 16 - The Bowls are poured out

There seems to be a general correspondence between the seven bowls and the seven trumpets. Remember, the trumpets were judgements of warning, and were in a sense a foretaste of the final judgement to come.

What is partial in the trumpets is complete in the bowls (no.s 1-4); what extends to the non-human creation in the trumpets extends to humanity in the bowls (no.s 1, 4); instead of the church proclaiming repentance in the trumpets, the church is simply called to be ready for Christ's immanent return in the bowls (no. 6); while some turn and glorify God in the trumpets (no. 6), no-one repents in the bowls (no.s 4,5,7).

Where are God's people in all of this? Standing beside the sea of glass which is before the throne of God (15:2-3) observing, but not participating in this action. For believers in Christ, who share in His victory over the beast and all he represents, the final judgement no longer has any bearing, for we have already faced that judgement when we died with Christ as He bore the total wrath of God upon our sin. For us the final judgement has been completed, and we can look forward to the end of history with the same attitude of hope and worship we see demonstrated by this crowd. While we may be grieved and saddened at the death of the wicked - as is God - we must and will still worship God and rejoice in the fact that He is just in all He does.

Great and amazing are your deeds,
O Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
O King of the nations!
4 Who will not fear, O Lord,
and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed.