

“THE WRATH THAT THEY DESERVE”

I. Introduction

- A. In literature and films, we are often introduced to characters who are so thoroughly and intransigently evil that we just know that their downfall is inevitable.
- B. When wickedness is presented in such clear-cut and unsympathetic ways, our sense of justice is evoked.
- C. The reason why human beings have this sense of justice is because we are made in the image of the God who is perfectly righteous and perfectly just.
- D. While people sometimes take offense at the Bible’s presentation of the wrath of God, a universe without it would be a universe without justice.
- E. As we study this passage in Revelation this evening, we will consider the theme of divine wrath falling upon people who deserve it.

II. The Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb

- A. Chapter 15 begins by introducing the next cycle of judgments, the seven bowls of wrath.
 - 1. One thing that stands out in the description of the bowl judgments in verse 1 is that they are called “the last” of God’s judgments on evil.
 - 2. This does not mean that every detail in this cycle of visions comes after the previous cycles of visions.
 - 3. That would not make sense, since the final judgment was depicted in the image of the great end-time harvest in the last part of chapter 14.

4. In Revelation 15:1, the word “last” simply means that this is the last cycle of seven-fold judgments that John sees in the series of visions that he was given.
- B. While the bowls are first mentioned in verse 1, they do not begin to be poured out until the beginning of chapter 16.
1. This is another instance of the interlocking literary technique that John employs to connect his visions.
 2. Instead of moving directly from one visionary sequence right into the next, he overlaps the cycles of visions.
 3. After introducing the bowl judgments in verse 1, John turns back to the picture of the saints in the heavenly sanctuary.
 4. He sees a sea of glass mingled with fire, and the saints of God are standing beside it.
 5. This is another picture of the church triumphant, just like we saw at the beginning of chapter 14 with the symbolic figure of the 144,000 singing the new song before God’s throne in heaven.
- C. The sea of glass is a symbol indicating that God has stilled the chaotic sea, the place from which the beast arose.
1. This brings to mind how the Lord delivered his people from Pharaoh’s army by making a way through the Red Sea.
 2. The fire that is mingled with the sea here is an image of divine judgment.
 3. God delivers his people by sending judgment upon those who oppress them, just as he did when he brought Israel out of Egypt.
 4. The saints are described as those who have conquered the beast.

5. They are so described because by faith they participate in the victorious conquest secured by Jesus, the Lamb of God.
 6. This is true even if the beast does its worst to them and puts them to death.
 7. As we saw back in chapter 12, they have conquered Satan and his forces “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.” (Rev 12:11)
- D. John tells us that the saints sing a song to celebrate what God has done for them in Christ, and this song is called the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb.
1. Once again, we see the redemption of God’s people being described in reference to Israel’s deliverance from Egypt.
 2. Jesus’ death and resurrection secured the salvation that was typified by the exodus.
 3. This is made clear by the way Jesus’ death is described in Luke 9:31, where it says that at the transfiguration Moses and Elijah “appeared in glory and spoke of [Jesus’] departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:31 ESV)
 4. The term that the ESV translates as “departure” is literally *exodos* in the Greek.
 5. This explains why Luke says that it is something that Jesus was about to “accomplish.”
 6. Jesus gave himself up on the cross in order to set us free from our ultimate bondage, the bondage of sin and death.
- E. It is also important to note that the song of Moses and of the Lamb are not two separate songs, but one song.

1. We might say that it is one song presented in two movements.
2. The song of Moses is the song of redemption in view of the foreshadowing of redemption under the Old Testament dispensation of the covenant of grace.
3. The song of the Lamb is the song of redemption in view of the fulfillment of redemption in the New Testament dispensation of the same covenant of grace.
4. This makes it clear that there is a continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament.
5. They both feature the same plan of salvation being worked out, though the plan is depicted in its varying stages.
6. The song of the saints that John hears in his vision praises God for the great and amazing things that he has done, displaying his justice and his truth.
7. This is the only fitting way to respond to God and his ways.
8. That being the case, all the nations are summoned to come and worship him.
9. This is the summons that the church is commanded to declare throughout all the world.

III. The Smoke-Filled Tent of Testimony

- A. We turn now to the next part of the vision, which begins in verse 5.
 1. John says that he sees the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven being opened.
 2. The term “witness” can also be translated as “testimony.”

3. In this context it refers to the tablets of the testimony, the tablets kept in the ark, upon which were written the ten commandments.
 4. The fact that the bowl judgments originate in the tent of testimony is significant.
 5. It underscores that the law of God is the basis for these judgments.
 6. This vision is depicting the fulfillment of what Paul writes about in Romans 2 when he says to all who are apart from Christ, "because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."
- B. The fact that the sanctuary is described as being opened is significant.
1. In the Old Testament, the sanctuary was a place of restricted access.
 2. Its innermost part, the place where the ark and the testimony were kept, was entirely closed off, with the sole exception of the duties performed by the high priest on the Day of Atonement.
 3. The reason why access to the sanctuary was so restricted was in order to protect the Israelites.
 4. If they were exposed to the divine glory apart from God's provision of atonement, they would be consumed by the divine wrath because of their sin.
 5. The closed-off nature of the sanctuary served as a perpetual reminder to the Israelites of their need for atonement in order to live in fellowship with God.
 6. Here in John's vision, the opening up of the sanctuary is an ominous picture.
 7. It is showing the Judge of all the earth being unleashed on an impenitent world.

- C. The other detail that is significant in this section is that smoke representing God's glory and power filled the sanctuary so that no one could enter it until the seven plagues were poured out.
1. This points back to Exodus 40, where the glory cloud covered the tent of meeting so that Moses was not able to enter it.
 2. From that point on, the Lord provided mediation for his people through the priests.
 3. But here in Revelation, no one is able to enter the sanctuary until the judgments are finished.
 4. The point being made by this is that there is no possibility of intercession for those who worship the beast and receive its mark.
 5. The only priestly figures in the vision are the seven angels who carry the bowls, and they are clearly not making atonement for sin but executing judgment upon sin.
 6. Nothing is able to turn back the holy judgment that God sends upon those whose allegiance is to the beast.

IV. The First Five Bowls of Wrath

- A. This brings us to the first five bowls of wrath, which begin to be poured out in chapter 16 verse 1.
1. One thing that stands out about these bowl judgments is that they are parallel to the earlier trumpet judgments.
 2. In both visionary cycles, the first judgment afflicts the earth, the second afflicts the sea, the third afflicts the fresh water, the fourth afflicts the sun, the fifth has to do with the spiritual forces of evil, the sixth is connected with the Euphrates river, and the seventh employs the imagery of lightning, thunder, and an earthquake to depict the final judgment.

3. This tells us that the seven trumpets and seven bowls are depicting the same thing, though in slightly different ways.
 4. This is further underscored by the fact that both bear similarities to the plagues that God sent on Egypt.
 5. These cycles of visions depict the judgments that God sends upon this world between Christ's first and second comings in order to bring about the deliverance of his people.
 6. The key difference between the trumpets and the bowls is that there is a clear intensification in the bowl judgments.
 7. While the trumpets depicted judgment being announced and carried out in a limited sense, the bowls depict judgment being poured out in full measure.
 8. You may recall that the first four trumpets only resulted in one-third of the earth, sea, water, and sun being afflicted.
 9. There is no such restriction with the bowls.
 10. These judgments are all-encompassing.
 11. The point being emphasized is that even within this present age, God's temporal judgments function as harbingers of the inevitability and finality of judgment when it comes at the end.
- B. Let's take a brief look at what is said about the first five bowl judgments.
1. The first one is poured out on the earth, resulting in painful sores coming upon all who worship the beast.
 2. This is based on the Egyptian plague of boils.
 3. Notice the irony of this judgment.
 4. Those who bear the mark of the beast will be marked with these sores, which are probably symbolic of the spiritual and

psychological torment that was previously depicted in the fifth trumpet.

- C. The second bowl is poured out on the sea, causing it to turn to blood.
 - 1. This points back to the Egyptian plague in which the Nile was turned to blood.
 - 2. It is symbolic of economic suffering, since maritime trade was so important for the economy in Asia Minor.
 - 3. The economic impact of Babylon's fall is also described with sea-faring imagery in chapter 18.
 - 4. We should note that some preterists argue that this plague was literally fulfilled in a massacre of Jews by the Romans on the Sea of Galilee, a massacre that is reported in the writings of Josephus.
 - 5. There are a number of problems with this interpretation.
 - 6. First, in that massacre, many of the Jews who were killed were not killed in the sea but alongside it.
 - 7. Second, it did not result in the literal death of every living thing in the Sea of Galilee.
 - 8. Lastly, preterist interpreters do not see the other plagues in this list as literal but as symbolic.
 - 9. Their decision on whether to interpret literally or symbolically is too arbitrary.
- D. The third bowl is poured out on the rivers and springs, which is probably another symbol for some form of economic suffering.
 - 1. It too is based on the Egyptian plague that turned the Nile to blood.

2. This plague is unique in that it is responded to with acclamations of praise from an angel and from the altar.
 3. The angel praises God for displaying his justice in this manner.
 4. The wicked oppress God's people and unjustly shed their blood, so it is just that they should be given blood to drink.
 5. The misery that comes upon them in this plague is exactly what they deserve.
 6. As we reflect upon this, we should remember that it is only because of God's grace to us in Christ that we are not included in the "they" here at the end of verse 6.
 7. Were it not for the fact that Christ has satisfied the demands of God's justice on our behalf, we too would be deserving of judgment.
- E. The second acclamation in response to the third plague comes from the altar.
1. This is significant because of what has been said about the altar previously in Revelation.
 2. Back in chapter six, the souls of those who had been slain for their witness to Christ cried out from under the altar.
 3. And in chapter 8, the saints' prayers for vindication arose from the altar as sweet incense.
 4. This tells us that the plague being described here in chapter 16 is sent in response to those prayers.
- F. The fourth bowl is poured out on the sun, resulting in people being scorched with fire.
1. This symbolism of alterations in the natural order of the world bringing torments to the ungodly declares that God's judgment

falls upon the world because it has altered his laws.

2. The fifth bowl is poured out on the throne of the beast, causing his kingdom to be plunged into darkness.
3. This recalls the plague of darkness at the time of the exodus, and here it represents the downfall of kingdoms that oppose and oppress the church.
4. The thing that the fourth and fifth bowl judgments have in common is that they cause people to curse God and harden themselves in their rebellion against him.
5. Even as their world is crashing down on them, they can only blaspheme God.
6. This is something that we see happening all the time.
7. Instead of responding to suffering and devastation by humbling themselves and repenting of their sin, many people simply dig in their heels and continue to defy God.
8. In fact, this is what we all would do were it not for the grace of God.

V. Conclusion

- A. The Bible's pictures of God's judgment on the wicked are not pleasant.
- B. Many people take offense at them, seizing the opportunity to accuse God of evil.
- C. The irony is that people would not even be able to recognize anything as evil were it not for God.
- D. People can try to stand in judgment of God all they want, but at the end of the day it won't do them any good.

- E. One day, they will come face to face with him, and every one of their evil and impure thoughts, words, and deeds will be laid bare before the God who is holy, holy, holy.
- F. On that day, every person who stands before God apart from Christ will get exactly what their deeds deserve.
- G. This is why we are called to endurance, holding fast to Jesus in faith and keeping God's commandments.