

On Monday night, I attended a District of North Vancouver Council Meeting. With a proposal before the Councillors, to develop two new turf soccer fields at Inter River Park, North Vancouver Football Club encouraged players and parents to attend and show their support. As we were waiting for the meeting to begin, the Club President—Stuart—turned to me and asked whether I had heard the news that was coming out of Toronto. I hadn't heard, and so Stuart filled me in.

On Monday, at 1 pm on Yonge Street, a 25 year old man intentionally drove a rental van into a crowd of pedestrians—10 are dead, and more than a dozen others are injured. While the investigation is ongoing, it appears that the driver's murderous rage was a "protest" against any number of women who had previously rejected his sexual advances.

After hearing the details of the attack, I sat there stunned. A few moments later, Stuart asked a question that many people across Canada are asking: *what kind of a world do we live in?*

We live in a world that is breathtakingly beautiful, and, at the same time, unpredictable, unsafe, and profoundly marked by evil. Why is the world the way it is? Why is it so beautiful? Why is it so broken?

At the risk of being too simplistic, Christians believe that all of the goodness and beauty we experience is connected to the Beautiful One—to God—the Creator of heaven and earth. Similarly, all that is wrong with the world, that which is twisted and evil, flows from the Evil One. The book of Revelation speaks of an age-old rebellion—Satan rebelled against God and was cast out of heaven. In his anger,

Satan incited our first human parents—Adam and Eve—to join in his rebellion. He didn't phrase his temptation in terms of rebellion against God, instead, he planted the seed of mistrust: *Is God doing what's best for you, or, what's best for Him? Why does He limit your freedom and hold things back from you?*

Those seeds of mistrust came to full bloom. What the Bible calls "sin" is simply a turning away from God. Adam and Eve joined in Satan's rebellion, turning from God, and this turning had disastrous consequences for both the human race, and, for all of creation.

The battle for universal supremacy has never been in doubt; God is on the throne and Satan is not. When Jesus died on the cross He broke the enslaving power of sin; the resurrection of Jesus assures us that death's power has been broken too. But in spite of this great victory, Satan is unwilling to concede defeat. The entire world experiences the tension of "a battle won but not quite over."<sup>1</sup> Until Jesus returns, Satan is at work, seeking to destroy all that God loves—especially the people of God.

*Revelation* calls God's people to remain faithful to Jesus through suffering and persecution. While God's people faithfully endure, we hold on to the following promises: (1) God is seated in the place of power and authority; Satan may oppose Him, and us, but he is no match for God; (2) Jesus will return for us; and (3) Justice will be done.

If you've read through Revelation 14-18, you've likely struggled with the images and language of judgement. We're not used to

<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Revelation*, 263.

thinking about God’s judgement in terms of justice; we are more likely to accuse God of being petty or vindictive. This perspective says a lot more about us, and the way our culture thinks, than it does about God.

**illus:** As we turn our attention to Revelation 15-16, I want to offer an analogy that I trust will help us to think about God’s justice as “good news.” I grew up reading Louis L’Amour Western novels; I read them by the dozen. All of his books featured a land that was rugged and weather that was severe—harsh winters, fierce summers. Taming the land and surviving the weather required a strength of character and body. The heroes of L’Amour’s novels were brave men and woman who sold everything, hitched their wagons, and headed West—they were the homesteaders, the cowboys, the lawmen.

But they didn’t call it the “Wild West” for nothing—the land was wild and untamed, and so too were many of the people. Enforcing the law was difficult; in the Wild West, all too often, might made right. If you were motivated enough, tough enough, mean enough, you could take what you wanted—survival of the fittest.

In a typical two bit town, with a General store, a large saloon, and not much else, trouble was always brewing. The carpenter hired to build a barn, never got paid. A barmaid—beaten up by the town bully—is out of work for months, but the bully gets away with it. A good family is muscled off their land—they lose everything and have nowhere to turn. The problem with a two-bit town is that there’s always something going wrong and no one with the will or the authority to right the wrongs.

A two-bit town isn’t big enough to employ their own judge; they rely on the travelling kind, who stops by every few months. And when the judge comes to town, you know the courtroom will be full. The judge will hear each case, listening to the list of grievances, sifting what’s true from what’s not. The carpenter will finally get paid. The town bully will stand trial for his abuse. The family will get their land back. Judgement will be handed down; justice will be done. With judgement comes good news for the carpenter, the barmaid, and the family.<sup>2</sup>

If we think about judgement in terms of an angry, unreasonable, God, punishing those who are innocent, we are going to be at odds with the picture that *Revelation* presents. The truth of the matter is that most of us cannot conceive of God’s judgement being “good” simply because most of us haven’t experienced a life-time of oppression or violence. But that part of you that cries out when you see evil and injustice—on Yonge Street, in your school, workplace, or family—that part of you expresses something that is deeply rooted in God.

*Revelation* was written to a persecuted church, to people who were being marginalized, oppressed, arrested, and killed. John—the author of *Revelation*—didn’t patronize their suffering with slogans; He called the church to remain true to Jesus Christ. Because God is still on the throne, because God will return for us, we can rest assured that judgement is coming and justice will be done.

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<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Bible For Everyone: Revelation*, 137-138.

At this time we are going to take a closer look at Revelation 15; let me invite you to open your Bibles with me and follow along as I read.

*“I saw in heaven another great and marvellous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God’s wrath is completed. 2 And I saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and its image and over the number of its name. They held harps given them by God 3 and sang the song of God’s servant Moses and of the Lamb:*

*“Great and marvellous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. 4 Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”*

*5 After this I looked, and I saw in heaven the temple—that is, the tabernacle of the covenant law—and it was opened. 6 Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. 7 Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. 8 And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.”*

John’s vision begins with what he calls “*a great and glorious sign*”: seven angels, holding seven bowls, containing seven plagues—the bowls symbolize God’s final judgement and the completion of His wrath. In Revelation 15 and 16, the word “wrath” is repeated four times; that marks it out as an important word, and it’s important that we understand this word correctly.

God is not driven along by an anger that is out of control, or, out of proportion. God’s wrath, though filled with emotion, is not primarily an emotion. God’s wrath is tied to His commitment to what is right, holy, and beautiful. As Pastor Mardi said last week, “*God’s wrath is his love in action against sin.*” God’s wrath is directed toward that which twists, disfigures, or destroys who—or what—God loves. In God, wrath and goodness are not opposites—they are companions.<sup>3</sup>

**Vs. 2:** But after mentioning coming judgement, John’s vision narrows, and our attention is directed toward a particular group of people, and, to the song they begin to sing. The people are described as those who had been “*victorious over the beast*,” these are the martyrs, those who did not shrink back from death, remaining faithful to Jesus.

We’re told that these faithful Christians began to sing “*the song of Moses and of the Lamb.*” When God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, after He split the Red Sea and delivered Israel from Pharaoh’s army, Moses sang a song about God’s victory (Ex. 15:1-18). This song is rooted in Moses’ song, but it celebrates the victory won by

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<sup>3</sup> In his book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf writes, “Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God’s wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn’t wrathful at the sight of the world’s evil. God isn’t wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love.”

Jesus.

The song points to three truths: **(1) God alone is all-powerful.** The dragon of Revelation 12, the beasts of Revelation 13, may have the power to threaten God’s people and spill their blood, but Jesus—the Lamb of God—has won! Death was not the end of Jesus, and it will not be the end of us. **(2) God’s actions are just and true.** Judgement is about to be poured out, justice is coming, and the martyrs affirm that God will act rightly. **(3) God is King of the Nations.** No Empire, no Emperor—no matter how great—can stand in God’s presence; all the poor **and** all the powerful with bow before Him.

The majesty of God is evidenced in the garb of the angels who represent Him (vs.6-7). Seven angels are dressed in clean, shining, white linen, with gold sashes, and holding golden bowls—this is an image of purity and royalty, holiness and power. And we’re told that the temple was filled with smoke; this is a symbol for the presence, majesty, and power of God.<sup>4</sup>

For the next few minutes, let’s turn our attention to Revelation 16 and to the seven bowls of judgement. I want to remind you that John uses image and metaphor to convey a theological message. We’re not meant to be on the lookout for a dragon or beasts. In the same way, the description of the seven bowl judgements are not meant to be understood literally, but, they do describe something very real, namely, God’s coming judgement.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Exodus 19:8; 40:34; 1 Kings 8:10-11.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon Fee, *Exodus*, 217.

When the first bowl was poured out, festering sores broke out on those who bore the mark of the beast (vs. 2). The second bowl turned the sea to blood (vs. 3), while the third bowl turned the rivers and springs to blood (vs. 4). In response to these judgements, an angel proclaims: *“You are just in these judgments, O Holy One, you who are and who were; for they have shed the blood of your holy people and your prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.”*(vs. 5-6)”

There is a kind of moral logic present here, based upon the principle of retributive justice, which is to say, *“an eye for an eye”*—the punishment fits the crime.<sup>5</sup> Those who bear the mark of the beast—fittingly—will bear the mark of God’s judgement in the form of sores. Those who have been bloodthirsty, putting God’s people to death, metaphorically speaking, will be given blood to drink.

In response to this proclamation of justice, we hear a second voice—the voice of the personified altar—saying, *“Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.”* This voice from the altar is reminiscent of Revelation 6:9 where the martyrs cry out from beneath the altar saying: *“How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”*

If you’ve ever been hurt, bullied, or pushed around, you can appreciate their question—how long must we wait? The longer we wait, the deeper the cry for justice becomes.

Throughout the ages, the church has held fast to the truth that God is not blind or deaf to the pain that we face, or to the evil being done—He sees and hears it all. And, He will act one day to be put everything to rights. We haven't been given a red-circled-date on the calendar, but the time is coming when God will put an end to evil, to sin, to rebellion, once and for all.

Perhaps you've been victimized, perhaps you're one of the people crying out "*How long?*" 2 Peter 3:9 reminds us that God is not slow in calling evil to account, He is patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. Even when God pours out judgement, His desire is for people to receive mercy.

After the 4th and 5th bowl judgements—vs. 8-11— we're told that those who followed the beast "*cursed the God of heaven...but they refused to repent of what they had done.*" You might think it's an easy decision, choosing mercy instead of judgement, but some refuse to turn, to humble themselves, to admit wrongdoing—they are loud and proud to the bitter end.

**Vs. 12,** With the pouring out of the sixth bowl, John saw a river opened up to "*prepare the way for the kings from the East*". Vs. 13, 14, and 16 describe three demonic spirits that gather these kings—and their armies—to wage war against God in a place called Armageddon. It's worth noting that this is the only time the word "Armageddon" is used in the entire Bible. Some have connected this

reference to the ancient city of Megiddo; many battles were fought at Megiddo because it functioned as a strategic gateway. But John's reference to Armageddon is cryptic, and there have been dozens of unsuccessful attempts to explain its significance.

What does seem clear is that this battle at Armageddon symbolizes "the final overthrow of all the forces of evil by the might and power of God."<sup>6</sup> Darrell Johnson notes that while these kings gather for war, Revelation never mentions a battle taking place. Jesus' return—vs 15—will be like a thief's, sudden and unexpected; when He returns, the battle is over!

**Vs. 17,** With the pouring out of the seventh and final bowl, a voice from the throne—presumably God's voice—cries out: *It is done!* Or, *It is finished!* What is finished? The power of the Empire to wage war against God and His people is finished. We're not told how this will take place, only that it will. Next week, as we look at Revelation 17 and 18, we'll take a closer look at this reality.

**Conclusion:** As I conclude this morning, I want to return to the subject of judgement, justice, and mercy.

Nearly twenty years, in a Newsweek article written about heaven, Kenneth Woodward wrote the following: "Missing from most contemporary considerations of heaven is the notion of divine justice."<sup>7</sup> Fleming Rutledge notes, "When affluent white Americans

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<sup>6</sup> Mounce, 302.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth L. Woodward, "Heaven," Newsweek, March 27, 1989, as quoted by Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, 128.

think of heaven, we tend to think of celestial serenity, natural beauty, and family reunions. Black Americans and other disadvantaged groups would be much more likely to think of God's promise that there will be ultimate justice. For anyone who has suffered great wrong, it is important to know, as the book of Revelation promises so wondrously, that all wrongs will be righted".<sup>8</sup>

We don't have to teach children to cry out, "*It's not fair!*", they just know. This longing for justice is one of the ways in which we reflect the image of God—our cry for justice echoes His.

Rutledge writes, "The biblical message is that outrage is first of all in the heart of God. If we are resistant to the idea of the wrath of God, we might pause to reflect the next time we are outraged about something—about our property values being threatened, or our children's educational opportunities being limited, or our tax breaks being eliminated. All of us are capable of anger about something. God's anger, however, is pure...God's wrath...is a way of describing his absolute [opposition] against all wrong and his coming to set things right."<sup>9</sup>

In order to set things right, God must deal with all that is wrong, and He must do so in a way that's consistent with who He is, and, the way things are. From time to time, you may hear someone talk about the need to "*forgive and forget*," but strictly speaking, this isn't a biblical notion.

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<sup>8</sup> Rutledge, 128.

<sup>9</sup> Rutledge, 129-130.

Does God forgive and forget? God certainly forgives, but not in the sense that He makes light of sin, sweeps things under the carpet, or says, "*Don't worry about it, it's no big deal!*" And to say that God "forgets" is a bit of a misnomer; how can a God who knows everything, forget something?

We tend to think about mercy and judgment in a binary way—it's either one or the other. From God's perspective the two are never separate. God doesn't grant mercy at the expense of justice, but neither does He hand out justice without offering mercy.

There is a great cost to God's forgiveness—a personal cost. To say that God "forgets" our sin is to say that God chooses to spare us from the ultimate consequences of our sin. Someone has to be accountable for sin—it is too destructive to ignore—the only question is *who* will be called to account?

God created the world, He loves me and you, but our turning away from Him has driven a wedge between us—there is a distance that must be bridged, wrongs that must be righted. God stands opposed to the sinful things we have said and done—things that have dishonoured Him, things that have hurt ourselves and others. But even in God's opposition to our sin, there has never been a moment when He has been against us. It wasn't *God's opposition to humanity* that needed to be overcome but *humanity's opposition to God*.

In becoming human, Jesus, God the Son, bound Himself to our sinful condition, and in so doing Jesus can and does act as humanity's representative—the life He lived and the death He died was for all people. At the cross, God, as the man Jesus, took the suffering we have received at the hands of others upon Himself. At the cross, Jesus took the sin we have committed against God and others upon Himself. At the cross, Jesus took our being judged “guilty” by God upon Himself.

Through Jesus we can experience a magnificent exchange—Jesus became what we are, that we might receive what is His. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*”

Even when God pours out judgement, His desire is for people to receive mercy. You might think it's an easy decision, choosing mercy instead judgement, but some refuse to turn, to humble themselves, to admit wrongdoing—they are loud and proud to the bitter end.

Someone will be called to account for our sin; we all have a choice to make, and God will honour our choice. At the cross, judgement fell on Jesus. We can either stand in the shadow of the cross, align ourselves with Jesus, and receive the mercy of God, or, we can refuse His mercy, and in so doing choose to shoulder God's judgement ourselves. We all have a choice to make and God will honour our choice.

We live in a world that is breathtakingly beautiful, and, at the same time, unpredictable, unsafe, and profoundly marked by evil. God loves us, He loves the world, and He has acted in Jesus to reconcile

all who turn to Him. Will you be among those who turn and receive His mercy?

### **Pray**

**Worship:** This morning I've asked Paul and the worship team to sing a song that will likely be new for many of you—it's a song about Christ's work on our behalf. If you know it, feel free to sing along; if you don't, listen and reflect on the goodness of God to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

### **Benediction:**