



Much like this year, 2005 was a year with more than its share of hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and thunderstorms. In the midst of that turbulence, Jay Leno asked: "Are we sure this is a good time to take God out of the Pledge of Allegiance?"

But on a more serious note, when things like this happen, and we can't help but think of the earthquakes in Chile and Haiti, it's not unusual for us to wonder, "Is this it? Is this the end? Didn't Jesus tell us that there would be earthquakes, famines, wars and rumors of wars?" Indeed, he did. But he also said, "...but that is not yet the end... all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs" (Mt. 24:6, 8).

If you live in Haiti or Chile or the Sudan, it must be hard to imagine it could get any worse. But when Jesus finally got around to talking about the end, he pointed to something far more catastrophic. He said there will be a "great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will." He added "unless those days had been cut short no life would have been saved" (Mt. 24:21, 22).

Our passage this morning gives us a graphic picture of what this will look like. Last week was hard. Revelation 14 was no walk in the park as we looked at the final judgment and hell. I wish I could tell you we get some relief. But in chapters 15 and 16 we get a more detailed picture of what will happen in those final days and months before the end. This is a terrible passage of Scripture. But this is also a wonderful passage of Scripture. You might wonder, "How could it be both terrible and wonderful at the same time?" Well, let me show you.

In these chapters we read of "seven bowls of wrath." Earlier in Revelation we saw seven seals being opened and then seven trumpets being sounded. Each time the series of seven depicts judgments sent by God on the people of the earth. Each series of seven gets more and more intense as they bring us closer to the end. The seven seals brought us through our present age right up to the end. When the seven trumpets are sounded things get even more intense as they focus more on that final period of history. Finally, the seven bowls reveal the final expression of God's judgment. One of the wonderful things about this is God's wrath really will be finished. In 15:1 it says "in them the wrath of God is finished." It's wonderful to know that when it comes to the wrath of God a time will come when it will be done, finished, completed. That's a good thing!

"Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels who had seven plagues, which are the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished. And I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God. And they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, 'Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty; Righteous and true are Your ways, King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy; For ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU, FOR YOUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS HAVE BEEN REVEALED.' After these things I looked, and the temple of the tabernacle of testimony in heaven was opened, and the seven angels who had the seven plagues came out of the temple, clothed in linen, clean and bright, and girded around their chests with golden sashes. Then 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. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power; and no one was able to enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

"Then I heard a loud voice from the temple, saying to the seven angels, 'Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.' So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth; and it became a loathsome and malignant sore on the people who had the mark of the beast and who worshiped his image. The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became blood like that of a dead man; and every living thing in the sea died. Then the third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of waters; and they became blood. And I heard the angel of the waters saying, 'Righteous are You, who are and who were, O Holy One, because You judged these things; for they poured out the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink. They deserve it.' And I heard the altar saying, 'Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments.' The fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the sun, and it was given to it to scorch men with fire. Men were scorched with fierce heat; and they blasphemed the name of God who has the power over these plagues, and they did not repent so as to give Him glory. Then the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom became darkened; and they gnawed their tongues because of pain, and

they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores; and they did not repent of their deeds. The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river, the Euphrates; and its water was dried up, so that the way would be prepared for the kings from the east. And I saw coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs; for they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them together for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty. 'Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame.' And they gathered them together to the place which in Hebrew is called Har-Magedon. Then the seventh angel poured out his bowl upon the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple from the throne, saying, 'It is done.' And there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder; and there was a great earthquake, such as there had not been since man came to be upon the earth, so great an earthquake was it, and so mighty. The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath. And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. And huge hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, came down from heaven upon men; and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, because its plague was extremely severe" (Rev. 15 & 16).

The seven bowls of wrath

These two chapters can be divided up into two sections. In chapter 15 the bowls of wrath are introduced. In chapter 16 they're poured out.

First, they're introduced. John sees a great and marvelous sign: seven angels with seven plagues that will finish the wrath of God. But he also sees God's people singing a song of praise. Like the Israelites gathered by the Red Sea, victorious over Pharaoh, these believers stand by what looked like a sea of glass and fire, victorious over the beast. Like Moses led the Israelites in a song, they sing the song of Moses which has become the song of the Lamb. They praise God for the greatness of his deeds and the justice of his ways. And then John sees the tabernacle of heaven opened, filled with glory, and seven angels emerge clean and bright. They're given seven bowls of wrath and no one is able to enter the tabernacle until they're poured out upon the earth.

And that's what they do. They pour them out. The first four bowls are very much like the first four trumpets, only more intense. In the seven trumpets, one-third of the earth was affected. People were being warned. But in the seven bowls, no more warnings; no more fractions. The previous judgments were partial; the bowls are total. They target first the earth which results in ugly, painful sores on the people who worship the beast. Then they

target the sea which becomes like blood. Then they target the freshwater rivers and springs which also become like blood. And then they target the sun so people get scorched. You can see the similarities between the plagues God sent to Egypt when he delivered his people from slavery and the plagues he sends here in the bowls of wrath. The implication is that once again God is delivering his people.

Then comes the fifth bowl. It's directed at the throne of the beast. His kingdom is plunged into darkness and people are so tormented they gnaw their tongues. The sixth bowl is the most complex. It's poured out on the Euphrates River. With that river dried up the kings of the east and their troops are able to advance. They're drawn by three frog-like spirits who appear out of the mouth of the false trinity (the dragon, the beast and the false prophet). They spew lies of propaganda by which the beast draws the kings of the earth together under his banner for one final battle.

But where are they going to and who are they fighting? John says they're going to the place which in Hebrew is called *Har-Magedon*. You've know all about Armageddon, right? You saw the movie! But here is the truth about Armageddon: There is no place in the Middle East called Armageddon. The name Armageddon literally means the Mountain of Meggido. There is a place 60 miles north of Jerusalem, near Mt. Carmel, known by the name of Meggido. But there is no mountain there. Actually, it's a vast plain. This was actually a place where Israel fought some of its most famous battles. Most likely, this name symbolizes an event. We don't know where that event will take place, but it will be the last resistance of the antichrist's forces against God before Jesus shows up. Actually, the battle is never even fought because the resistance ends when Jesus shows up.

Then comes the seventh bowl, poured out in the air. It's interesting that in Eph 2:2 Satan is called the "*the prince of the power of the air.*" This is who the seventh bowl is directed at: Satan and his gang. A horrifyingly huge earthquake shakes the earth. The great city of Babylon, which represents all the cities of the earth aligned against God, splits into three parts. One hundred pound hailstones crash from the sky; islands sink; mountains are leveled. This is it! This is the end!

God's wrath is terrible. God's wrath is wonderful. How that can be? Let me answer that by making four statements about the wrath of God each of us must come to grips with.

Four observations about God's terrible, wonderful wrath

First of all, God's wrath is being portrayed symbolically. Many of the things in these chapters are symbolic. It's like John is watching and describing a full length animated film produced by Jesus. It has actors with wild costumes and fantastically designed sets. The story conveys truth through symbols. Jesus is seen as a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes. Does Jesus actually look like

that? If he appeared right now is that what he'd look like? No! The seven eyes reveal his immense wisdom; the seven horns reveal his power; and he bears the scars of his sacrificial death like a slain Lamb. Will we actually encounter Satan as a dragon and the antichrist as a seven-headed beast? No. These are symbols. Are there really seven bowls of awful stuff? Will a real city called Babylon be split into three? Will there be 100 pound hailstones? These are symbols. But don't let that fool you. God's wrath is terrible! He wrote this way so we could feel and imagine how terrible it really is. It's severe. It's total.

Second, wrath emerges from the presence of a holy God. In chapter 5 this scene plays out from "*the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven*" (v.5). The tabernacle in the Old Testament carried the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. That's why it's called "*the tabernacle of testimony.*" This is a reminder of God's holy law. Judgment isn't the imposition of some arbitrary morality of man, but an expression of the way God created us to live. In much of Israel's life the tabernacle was the place where people met with the living God, called "*the tent of meeting.*" It was there God revealed his character and nature as the Almighty who is holy and righteous; as One who hates evil and injustice. That's why the angels are described in v.6 with such radiance and purity. God's wrath isn't like human wrath. It's not full of spite. It's not irrational and random. It's not an emotional flare up of anger like we have. God's wrath is his "strong and settled opposition to all that is evil." It's a burning zeal for the right coupled with a perfect hatred for all that's wrong. A.W. Tozer wrote, "The holiness of God, the wrath of God, and the health of creation are inseparably united. God's wrath is his utter intolerance of whatever degrades and destroys. He hates iniquity as a mother hated the polio that would take the life of the child." Wrath emerges from the presence of a holy God.

That's why it can be celebrated. That's the third thing. Here in these chapters we see God's people celebrating the wrath of God. It's wonderful to them. They're not celebrating the fact that people are going to Hell, but they're celebrating the fact that God is just and he vindicates his people. Three different times in this passage they praise God. In 15:3 they sing, "*Great and marvelous are your works, O Lord God, the Almighty; Righteous and true are your ways.*" In 16:5 the angel cries out, "*Righteous are you, who are and who were, O Holy One, because you judged these things.*" And in 16:7 the altar says, "*Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are your judgments.*"

We have a harder time in America understanding this than people in other parts of the world. We don't always experience the level of evil and the cry for justice others do. Sometimes we get a glimpse of it. We watch the news and see a reporter standing on the streets of Richmond or Oakland telling about another murder of an innocent bystander. We sit and listen as an enraged, anguished mother who just lost her 5-year-old

daughter to random gunfire, cries out, "How can this happen? When is this going to stop? Won't someone do something?" That's a cry and a raging and a prayer—a cry for mercy and a prayer for justice. That prayer will go largely unanswered if all we have rely on is whatever hope can be squeezed from the cruel forces of history. But the word from Revelation is that God isn't bound by the walls of history. He'll not leave the helpless forever alone. The prayers of his people have been heard and he'll act. God's wrath is terrible; God's wrath is wonderful.

The fourth thing is that God's wrath is justified. It says in 16:6 "*They deserve it.*" There are at least two reasons for that. One comes in v.6, "*For they poured out the blood of the saints and the prophets, and you have given them blood to drink.*" In other words, the punishment fits the crime. Judgment is always consistent with the sin. But another reason is that they were given ample opportunity to repent but v.9 says, "*they did not repent so as to give God glory,*" and v.11 says, "*they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores and they did not repent of their deeds.*" They're as stubborn as old Pharaoh was. Through these judgments God was trying to get their attention, but they became more entrenched in their position. One survivor of a plane crash says he always expected people who were dying to cry out to God for mercy in their final moments, but most of them responded with cursing.

Saddam Hussein was captured near-dead out of an eight-foot hole filled with rats and mice. He was then flown to a secret location for a meeting with four members of Iraq's Governing Council. Despite his condition, Saddam was defiant and unrepentant. He refused to apologize to the Iraqi people. Four men spent 30 minutes confronting him with his crimes. He didn't deny any of them, but tried to justify them. As they left, one of them said "May God curse you. Tell me, when are you going to be accountable to God and the Day of Judgment? What are you going to tell him about the mass graves, the Iran-Iraq war, thousands and thousands executed? What are you going to tell God?" Saddam cursed him.

The question is how does God's terrible, wonderful wrath apply to you and me? Let me apply this to two groups of people.

Believers should stay awake and keep their clothes on

First of all to believers. Right in the middle of all this there is a word addressed to believers. It comes right as the sixth bowl is being poured out and right before the end. It's a very important word coming from the Lord Jesus himself. It's one of seven blessings found in the book of Revelation. The first was in 1:3, "*Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy...*" The second was in 14:13, "*Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!*" And here is the third in 16:15, "*Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his garments, lest he walk about naked and men see his*

shame." I thought about calling this sermon "Keep Your Clothes On" but I thought better! The imagery here is powerful. You get sleepy and decide to go to bed. You take your clothes off and climb in. But then a thief comes in the night and you're forced to jump out of bed naked and everyone sees your naked body and you're ashamed. Now you may be very comfortable with your body, but no one wants to be caught naked like that. Jesus says, "I know you're sleepy, but you need to stay awake. You need to keep your clothes on. Why? Because I'm coming like a thief—when you least expect it. You never know when a thief will show up. All these things I'm talking about, these seven bowls of wrath and my return in the clouds, they'll come about when you least expect it. And so you need to be alert. You need to be ready."

We don't want that day to surprise us. We want to be ready. Paul said to the Thessalonians, *"For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober"* (1 Thes 5:2-6).

So in light of this, I ask you, child of God, are you ready? Being ready, staying awake, doesn't mean we live with our head in the clouds. It doesn't mean we stop everything and wait for Jesus to come back. It means we're busy doing the things he told us to do. It means we're investing our lives (money, time, emotions) into the eternal things. We're not investing ourselves in this kingdom, but in the next. We live as those who know our treasures are there. Are you awake? Are your clothes on? This is hard for us. For many of us life is good. We work hard to make sure life stays good. We know that one day we're going to die or one day Jesus will return but it doesn't really impact the way we live. Imagine a young man comes home from four years in Iraq. He and his fellow soldiers get off the plane and there is a throng of people there to greet them. All his buddies are greeted by loved ones but no one is there for him. He goes home and finds his wife and kids watching TV. He says to them, "Where were you?" And they said, "Well, we were kind of waiting for you, we just weren't watching for you." Jesus wants us to wait and watch. He wants us to stay alert.

Unbelievers should accept the finished work of Christ on the cross

But if you're here today and you're not a believer, or you're not really sure if you are, let me tell you how the terrible, wonderful

wrath of God applies to you. These chapters are book-ended or bracketed with the words *"finished"* and *"done."* Back in v.1 it says, *"in them the wrath of God is finished."* Then in 16:17 it says of God's wrath, *"It is done."* So a time will come when God's wrath is done, finished.

You might not that know the apostle John didn't just write Revelation, he also wrote something else—a gospel that bears his name, the Gospel of John. I don't believe John could have written the words that bracket these chapters without thinking of something he wrote in his own gospel. In John 19:30 Jesus says something similar and I can't believe John didn't connect the dots. Jesus is on the cross and he cries out, *"It is finished!"* What is finished? The wrath of God is finished, just like in Revelation, except here someone else is taking all of God's wrath upon himself. God the Father is pouring out his wrath and it's being drunk to the last drop by God the Son so we don't have to drink it.

This is the terrible, wonderful wrath of God. The voice from the throne that cries out in Revelation *"It is done"* is the same voice that cries out from the cross *"It is finished."* The One who sends forth the seven angels to pour out the bowls of wrath is the same One who loves us so much he sent his Son into the world to endure that wrath for us so that everything that needs to be done in order for us to enter into a relationship with a Holy God has been finished. Everything that needs to be done about your sin and my sin has been finished. It is done. It is paid for. There is no wrath left for you.

Years ago when Lynn and I were celebrating our first anniversary we went out to dinner. We hardly had any money so we ordered the cheapest thing on the menu—chicken! When we were finished, the waiter came and asked us if we wanted to order dessert, but of course we said no. Then he just happened to add that my father had called before we came in and paid for the dinner. I said, "Can we start over?" But here is the point: your sin and my sin has been paid for. There is no wrath left in the bowl. It is finished. There is nothing left to do but believe it and receive it. Why would you insist on paying for something that's already been paid for?

If you're here this morning and you've yet to understand or believe that, let me ask you, where do you want your judgment to take place? At the cross or at Armageddon? God is giving you an opportunity to say, "I want God's wrath that I deserve to be finished at the cross, not at Armageddon."

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