

Judgment

Revelation 18:1-5, 9-1, 15-19

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If you are looking for a God who is a sweet, indulgent grandfatherly-type, who says things like, “Aw, honey, it’s all right; it doesn’t matter”, then you probably shouldn’t read Revelation 15-18. If you want a God who looks the other way and pretends not to notice your sins, then you probably don’t want to read Revelation 15-18. W. H. Auden once said, “There are those who will argue, ‘I like committing sins; God likes forgiving them; really the world is admirably arranged.’” If that’s your choice in a God—one who enjoys forgiving sins—then you might not want to read Revelation 15-18.

The God pictured in these chapters of Revelation is a God who does not tolerate sin and evil. This is a God of judgment.

Throughout this series of sermons on the book of Revelation, we’ve been saying that one of the main purposes of this book is to give people instruction about how to live in a world where sin and evil are all around. In a world full of sin and evil, Revelation calls us to worship, sing and pray—in order to be continually reminding ourselves that God is in control. Revelation calls us to be witnesses to God’s word so that others will know that God is in control. Revelation calls us to endure, to remain faithful, even as sin and evil seem to be having their way.

But underlying all this is the nagging question: Is God ever going to do anything about all this sin and evil?

Here in Revelation 15-18, God does something. God brings harsh and strong judgment on the sins of the world. God pours out bowl after bowl of wrath—seven bowls in all—on the sinful world, and it is a frightening scene. People are afflicted with painful sores; the sea turns to blood; the sun scorches people with fire; then the sun disappears and people are plunged into abject darkness; there are hailstones weighing 100 pounds dropping out of heaven onto people. It’s clear that God is not going to let the sins of the world go unpunished. God’s judgment is real.

Every time we repeat the Apostles’ Creed we say it: “he will come again to judge the living and the dead.” But maybe we’ve said it so many times, that now we don’t really think about what those words mean. Revelation 15-18 reminds us what they mean: sin will not go unpunished.

I’ve been living with this book of Revelation for awhile now, and I’ve been acting like W. C. Fields. The story is that W. C. Fields was in the hospital, and although he was not a very religious man, his nurse came in one day and found him reading the Bible. She asked, “What are you doing, Mr. Fields?” And W. C. Fields answered: “Looking for loopholes.”

Well, as I have read these four chapters in Revelation over and over again, I’ve been looking for loopholes, something to soften these harsh words. And here’s what I’ve come up with: these words don’t really apply to me. These words are for somebody else. They were addressed to people living a long time ago under the oppressive political regime of the Roman empire—what Revelation calls “Babylon the Great”. Revelation says that one day Rome will be brought to judgment for its injustices and violence and

abusive power. Revelation was written to help those people back then to survive the oppression of Rome. So what we've got here is ancient history, and doesn't apply to me.

That's one loophole.

Here's another. Even if these words are addressed to the world in which we are now living, surely I'm going to be spared: I'm one of the good guys; I'm one of the believers. I come to church; I pay my tithe; I take a turn keeping the neighbors at Room in the Inn; I occasionally bring some canned food for the Yellow Bag program; I even help out in the nursery from time to time. Yes, God is going to judge all those sinners out there; fortunately, I'm not one of them.

The judgment being pronounced in Revelation 15-18 is on the rich, the powerful, those merchants who have gotten rich at the expense of the poor. And one of these days, they are going to get what they deserve. They may have it good now, but their day of judgment is coming.

Yes, God's judgment is coming; fortunately, it's not coming for me.

Have you ever noticed that the people riding around with a bumper sticker about the Rapture are always sure that they are going to be taken up in the Rapture while other people will be left behind? "In the event of Rapture, this car will be unmanned." My favorite of these Rapture bumper stickers is: "In the event of Rapture, this car will swerve while my mother-in-law takes the wheel." Which is to say: "I'm being raptured, and I'm pretty sure she is not."

God's judgment is coming; fortunately, it's not coming for me. One of these days all those sinners out there are going to get what they deserve. And I can't wait for them to get their just desserts.

But what if...?

As much as I would like to find the loopholes that spare me from the coming judgment, I don't think any loopholes exist. These chapters of Revelation portray a God who judges sin, and you and I are not immune to that judgment.

The reason we have a Prayer of Confession in our worship every week is to force us to be honest with ourselves and with God. There are churches which have removed the Prayer of Confession from their order of worship because they think it's too negative, too much of a "downer." They'd rather not be reminded of their sinfulness.

I get that: I don't like being reminded of my sinfulness either, but if I'm going to speak the truth about myself, my sin is something I must face with brutal honesty. There is coming a day when I am going to have to give account for my life, and I'm not sure I can count on God looking the other way and saying, "Aw, honey, it's all right; it doesn't matter."

The words of our Old Testament lesson, Psalm 8, have been on my mind a lot lately. The psalmist says that God has given to us human beings dominion over the earth that God has created—including the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. God made this good world and then gave us the responsibility to care for it. There is coming a day when we will have to give account before God for how we have done in caring for God's good world. And lately we haven't done a very good job of that.

In the past several weeks as we have seen the devastating effects of this disastrous oil spill, the words of the psalmist pronounce God's judgment. And I hope that BP or Halliburton or whoever is responsible for this ecological disaster will be held accountable.

But wait: why was BP out there in the first place? Why was BP willing to take those risks? They were out there because of me. They were drilling for oil in order to feed my addiction. They put the Gulf Coast at risk in order to satisfy my demand for more and more oil. Those oil-soaked birds are dead, the fish and shrimp and oysters are being killed, the Gulf wetlands are covered with oily goo because I want to be able to hop in my car and drive wherever I want to go.

The psalmist says that God has given to us human beings dominion over the earth that God has created—including the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. And lately we haven't done a very good job of that. There's coming a day when I am going to be held accountable for my part in this failure to care for this world that God has made.

Maybe one of the purposes of the book of Revelation is to call our attention to the sin and evil that are so much a part of our world and to force us to think about the ways in which we have contributed to the world's sin and evil. Maybe one of the things that Revelation does for believers living in this sinful and evil world is to call us to action, to do whatever we can to fight against sin and evil.

So let me tell you something I've been thinking about and something I'm going to try to do. It's a small thing, and I'm realistic enough to know that it won't make much difference in the big picture. I don't know if I'll be able to do this, but I need to try. I'm going to try to set aside one day every week when I don't use any of my gas powered vehicles or machines. I'm going to leave my car and scooter parked and my lawn mower in the garage. To do this, I'm going to have to make a small lifestyle adjustment. It's going to mean that one day a week I'll be giving up the convenience of hopping in my car to run to the store or other little unplanned trips. I know it's not much, but maybe if I do that one day a week, I'll become more aware of the gas I consume the other six days. It's a small step, but you know the saying, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." I may not be able to stick with this, but I need to try it as an act of penance for my sin. Maybe if I can use a little less oil and gas, then over time there will be less incentive in the future for BP and the others to take the kinds of risks that have brought this devastation to this world that God has made.

Revelation is about how to live in a sinful and evil world, and at least one thing that Revelation says is that our sin will be judged, and we will be held accountable for the things we have done and the things we have failed to do.

To wrap this up for today: there are just a couple of more things to say about these four chapters that deal with God's judgment. One thing to say is that the wrath of God's judgment does not go on forever. God pours out bowl after bowl of wrath on a sinful world, but eventually the bowls are empty, and the wrath of God's judgment comes to an end. God's judgment is not endless.

The other thing to say is that as you read about these plagues that God's wrath pours out on the world—the boils, the river turning to blood, the darkness—they are all reminiscent of the plagues which many years before God brought on Egypt. The result of those plagues was the Exodus: new life, freedom, hope, promise. The people looked back on those plagues and saw them as instruments of God's salvation. So it is here in Revelation: yes, God will judge our sin, but God's judgment always has a redemptive purpose. On the other side of God's judgment is God's salvation.

And that's where we're headed next week. ☩