

**FGBC: Just Judgment: It is Finished!**

Revelation 15:5-16:21

March 8, 2020

Dan Hoffman

Road rage is a hilarious bad habit. So about two weeks ago I was driving down Victoria St heading through a green light and there was this green Toyota Echo in the intersection waiting for me to pass so she could turn left. And I wasn't going fast enough for her – this has happened to me before.

And so as I passed she was kind enough to wave at me – but only with 1 finger. And as she did this her face contorted into a combination of the green Hulk and Quasimodo – it was very attractive (maybe you've seen this lady around town – maybe you are her...)

Anyway, while the windows were up - hers and mine, so I couldn't hear her - she was obviously speaking words that I can only describe as wrathful. Wrath is a funny thing. It generally exposes people who are trying to hide their idiocy.

...

Today we have come to an awful passage of scripture. It's all about God pouring out His wrath on the earth. If you've got a Bible on your phone or you see one in the pew in front of you go ahead and open it up to Revelation chapter 15.

...

Now God's wrath is about as unpopular a topic as you can find in scripture. It just seems to play into what everyone thinks about God – He's an old-fashioned, angry guy who's always looking for an opportunity to get back at sinners.

And so talking about God's wrath produces a bitter taste in our mouths. If you are a non-believer then it just confirms everything you've thought about God. And if you're a Jesus follower it's a bit embarrassing like we need to apologize for some of God's bad habits: He's really a great guy. He just throws tantrums from time to time.

But let's let the text speak for itself before we unpack it. Would you stand with me as we read Revelation 15 starting in verse 5. Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Revelation 15:5-16:21]

Wrath's not a word we use regularly. We talk about people losing their temper – I'm not sure where it goes – but wrath would be way over the top. It's like the lady in the Echo.

And so it's a bit disturbing here to find out that God has wrath. I mean we all kind of expected better from Him. He's supposed to be bigger than the worst of us. And if He's not then He certainly isn't worthy of our worship.

...

The worst thing is this isn't the only place we come across God's wrath in scripture. In fact it is spoken of in every book of the New Testament. And so the one thing we can't do is dismiss this as a variant idea. Our God is, among other things, a God of wrath. So what do we do with this?

...

Well, I want to draw three observations out of this passage that help answer this question.<sup>1</sup>

The first observation we need to make as we look at this passage is to remember that John is experiencing an apocalyptic vision. He's hearing things and seeing things, and the things he is seeing are pictures of reality – they are symbols.

And so in the last section we saw a woman clothed in the sun and standing on the moon. Now it's totally possible that some day soon there will be a woman standing on the moon. But I guarantee you she isn't going to be wearing the sun or having a crown of stars on her head. She's a symbol.

Elsewhere in Revelation Jesus is pictured as a Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes. Now does Jesus actually look like that? Is that what we are going to see when we walk into heaven? I hope not, and I don't think so. But we will meet a Jesus who is infinitely powerful and perfectly wise – that's what the horns and eyes mean.

So the descriptions we get in Revelation give insight into reality – they draw things out we might otherwise miss – but they themselves are not reality.

Here's the point: when John sees rivers of blood and frogs that perform miracles and angels holding bowls full of wrath – whatever that might look like – we should expect these things to be symbols with meaning rather than the actual reality themselves. This is apocalyptic literature.

Now that said, rivers of blood and demonic frogs is obviously not a symbol of sipping margaritas in Cancun. So these pictures, while not literal reality, don't make God's wrath any more palatable. God's wrathful judgment is brutal. That's the first observation.

...

The second observation I want to make is about the setting, or context, that this scene plays out from. In chapter 15 verse 5 John says he saw the temple in heaven opened up to him – and then he says "that is, the tabernacle of the covenant law."

Now John's not trying to get his word count up here, he's giving us a puzzle piece to understand the content of this chapter. He's setting the scene so we can understand God's wrath. And he says it comes out of "the tabernacle of the covenant law."

---

<sup>1</sup> Outline adapted from Darrell Johnson's "Discipleship on the Edge"

So what is this tabernacle of covenant law? Well, it was the tent of meeting that Moses built when he received the 10 Commandments. And these commandments were inscribed on stone tablets and put in the tabernacle – they were the covenant law.

And so the wrath that gets poured out here is in response to the covenant law which humanity has broken. We break God's law and face His wrath.

...

Now growing up I had friends who lived in a household with arbitrary and undefined rules – maybe you know what this is like. These rules didn't make sense and you never knew when you were about to break them.

So we lived out in the country, and everyone knows that 10-year-old boys are allowed to pee on trees in the country – it's just a right that creation allows. But one day me and my friends were outside swinging on the tire swing which was suspended from a huge tree in the forest in front of their house and my friend – who will remain nameless – decided to stand up on the swing and pee off into the trees. It seemed like only a minor variant on the allowed rule of creation.

But in mid swing, with his pants still down at his ankles, the door of the house opened and a deep voice yelled "Get in here." We all knew who was being addressed and so his brother and I stood sheepishly outside while he went in and learned a lesson – this was prior to the invention of time outs.

Another time he stuck a pill up his nose during breakfast and it got lodged there. But when he asked for help the response he got was another lesson. Fortunately, while he was learning the lesson the pill came out.

But what lessons did we learn? There was no way to know what the rules were or when we were going to break them. So the lesson was just stay away from that guy.

And some people think God's rules are like that. That He just makes up random rules that don't make sense and are just designed to take away our fun. But that's not at all what we get in God's Covenant Law.

Instead God's law is Him telling us how He designed the world to work and directing us towards the abundant life He wants us to enjoy.

So don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't covet your neighbour's stuff. And make God the only God in your life. And don't spend all your time working, set one day in seven aside for acknowledging Him.

These aren't random rules. When we break these laws we find ourselves breaking ourselves. Thieves and murderers and adulterers aren't the happy people in life. They've wrecked their lives. And as such God's moral covenantal laws are a lot like His other laws of nature.

So when I tell my kids not to walk too close to the edge on the Cotton Wood Island trail, I'm not making up an arbitrary rule, I'm telling them to respect the law of gravity which states that everyone who goes over the edge falls down whether they mean to or not.

So telling them to obey the law of gravity helps them avoid hurting themselves – not to mention wrecking my day! I've got no desire to drop my coffee and jump in the river.

So God's laws of nature – like gravity – and His covenantal laws – like don't murder – are similar in this regard. When He warns us about breaking them He is guiding us away from danger and into abundant life.

And that's the context here – verse 5 – John sees all this wrath coming out of the temple of the tabernacle of God's covenantal law.

And so, while the wrath that God pours out in this section is punishment, it is also the natural consequences of living against the way we were designed to live.

The most obvious example of this come with the first and the fifth bowls. So in verse 2 those who worship the beast and have his name or mark on their foreheads are inflicted with festering sores. And then in verse 10 John says the fifth bowl gets poured out on the throne of the beast and we read:

[The beast's kingdom] was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done. (Revelation 16:10-11)

So we've already talked about how having God's name on you was a way of saying His character was on you – you are growing more and more to look like Jesus. And similarly having Satan's mark on you means you are growing more and more to look like your dad the devil – and there isn't a third option.

And so here Satan's character has penetrated these people's souls so much that they are filled with hostility towards God. They've become what they worship. And so instead of being in the light like God wants us to be they are in the dark and thrashing around in an absolute absence of abundant life. And yet, like their father, they will not repent, even to escape God's wrath.

...

The other side of this is pictured by the seven angels that John describes in verse 6. They are dressed in holy garb – clean, shining linen with golden sashes – they are wearing the same clothes that Jesus wears in chapter 1.

The point is that they are holy and pure as they pour out these bowls. So the wrath here is totally different from the wrath of the lady in the car or my friend's dad. God's wrath is pure and sinless. There's no spite or even anger here. This wrath is golden in its integrity. Totally pure.

So that means the consequences aren't overboard, they fit the crime. They are righteous. And so the angel in verse 5 says: "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."

So the punishment, or the consequence, fits the crime. But this isn't to say these people are getting off easy – they aren't. God's judgment is horrible, but it is just.

...

Really?

...

Maybe you are here today and you haven't given your life to bringing Jesus glory, and you are thinking "I'm a pretty good person. I haven't killed anyone. Surely I don't deserve God's wrath." Or what about that nice grandma who bakes cookies, donates to charity but just isn't a Christian? What happens to her? Does she have to drink blood just because she doesn't have Jesus' name written on her? That doesn't seem like justice.

...

If you've ever wondered about this or been asked it, it is a hard question. And it doesn't have a soft, fuzzy, make-you-feel-good answer. But it does have an answer. You see the faulty premise to this question is that good people don't deserve God's wrath. But the Bible says there are no good people. Romans says:

No one is righteous— not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one. (Romans 3:10-12)

So the first mistake is thinking "because I haven't killed anyone I'm better than those bad people and so I should be on the right side of the bell curve. God should accept me."

And this isn't a crazy idea. In fact in every religion outside of Christianity – in Buddhism and Hinduism and Islam and Judaism – salvation or heaven or nirvana is obtained by being good enough. In Christianity alone salvation is given as a free gift of grace. And this means following Jesus is fundamentally different than being a good Muslim or Buddhist or anything else. Following Jesus is about receiving His gift of grace.

...

So what does receiving God's grace entail? Well, it means giving up being the god of your own life and allowing Jesus to be your God.

And so here we see two things. First, we see what sin is. Sin is refusing to make God your God. So sin isn't murdering or committing grand theft auto or tax fraud. Those are just symptoms of sin.

Real sin is rebellion against the God of the universe. It is saying "God, I'm not going to make my life about You, I'm going to make my life about me." Treason. And we are all guilty of that. And we see this in the text.

So verse 9 reads “And they cursed the name of God, who had control over the plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify Him. They refused to stop being the gods of their own lives and make Jesus their God.

...

The second mistake in thinking here is failing to understand the opposite of God’s wrath – His reward. You see people think heaven is going to be a theme park full of all your favorite activities and people, but that’s not what the Bible says. In fact there is no verse in the Bible that says Christians die and go to heaven. Instead the Bible says we will go and be with Christ. So for example Paul says:

For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better.... I long to go and be with Christ (Philippians 1:21-23)

So getting God’s reward means getting God. Heaven is about being with Jesus. And so atheist Christopher Hitchens said “Heaven would be hell for me.” Why? Because he doesn’t want to be with Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

And here’s the thing, God will not force His reward on us. If we insist on disobeying the laws of nature like gravity, He lets us win Darwin awards. And if we commit ourselves to rejecting His moral laws then He allows us to go to our own demise – to live without Him. This is what hell is – life without God now and forever. But here’s the mercy: it is our choice.

You see God wants abundant life for you, here and now and for eternity. He doesn’t want you to taste wrath. But justice demands that if you are committed to rejecting Him He will let you bring it upon yourself.

...

There is so much more here. We haven’t touched Armageddon or most of the bowls, but I have just one last observation to bring out today.

The third observation is rooted in verse 15 and is the only verse with Jesus speaking in this text. If you’ve got a red-letter Bible this is the only red verse. And He says:

[Read Revelation 16:15]

Jesus says we aren’t going to know when He is going to return, so we have to be ready. But do you hear the love in His voice? Even in the context of justice He says: “Please don’t get lazy about walking the path to abundant life I designed you to walk. Don’t bring wrath upon yourself.”

Even here God is hoping His creation will repent. But rebellious humanity won’t do it. Even when they are seared and in pain; even though they know God is in control and could change things, they refuse to repent and do what they were created to do – glorify God.

---

<sup>2</sup> If God is just, then why give eternal punishment for temporal sin? Vince Vitale & Ravi Zacharias <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zb5fEK99Blk> (Accessed March 7, 2020)

And so humanity, bent on living for their own glory, bent on being the gods of their own lives, find themselves receiving the consequences of their actions. But this isn't what Jesus wants for them. This isn't what He wants for you.

And so as the final bowl of God's wrath is poured out the seventh angel echoes Jesus' words from the cross – he says, verse 17, "It is done." Or "It is finished." What's finished? Everything that needs to be done in order for unholy sinners like us to enter a relationship with God is finished. Everything that needs to be done about sin is finished.

So here we have a "choose your own adventure" situation. Two conclusions, and the choice is up to us.

...

At the cross Jesus finished the judgment of the sin of those who come to Him. At the cross, God's burning zeal for righteousness, coupled with His hatred of evil, came together to save sinners. And this means there is a way out of the wrath of this passage. The way out is to throw ourselves at the feet of Jesus and allow Him to take the wrath of God we all deserve.

So just judgment is coming. The question is what path will you take? Will you walk the road God designed you to walk which will lead to the abundant life He wants you to live? Or will you buy the lie that you can be the captain of your own soul and end up wearing the consequences?

Friends, the call of Jesus is clear. We aren't going to know when He will return. But if we want to really live, now and forever, then we must stop trusting in ourselves and put our trust in Him.

There is no refuge from the wrath of the judging God. But there is refuge in the judging God. He has mercy for every sinner who repents.