

GROWINGdeeper

*Pastor Michael O'Neill
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REVEALED

Part Twelve: Revelation 15:1-16:21
2 Peter 3:9; Exodus 15; Revelation 6:10

1. Judgment

*- Numbers 32:23; Isaiah 6:4; Ezekiel 10:2-4, 11:23;
Exodus 19:16-18, 40:34-35; Numbers 14:10*

2. Armageddon

*- Revelation 17:16-18, 20:8; Judges 5:19; 2 Kings 9:27;
2 Chronicles 35:22; Zechariah 12:11*

3. Stay Awake!

- Matthew 24:42-44, 25:1-13; Revelation 3:3; 1 John 4:16-18

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West Valley Church
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**Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Twelve: Revelation 15-16¹**

I have to start by saying that I am so thankful to be a part of a pastoral team that is a true team. I love these guys and their families, and I literally cannot imagine doing ministry without being able to do it together with Arden, Jason, James, and Casey (notice I named them according to descending age. I did not mean to imply level of maturity). When we talked about doing this series, I asked them to consider taking a couple of the sermons each, so they've combined to do five of them and I will end up doing ten. And each of them have preached in a way and from a perspective that I would not have thought about – but I am grateful for, because they've taught me from the passages they preached on, and they did it in a way that was thorough and well-researched and yet at the same time meaningful, personal, and applicable. So I'm going to try to reach the bar that they set!

We only have a few more sermons left in this series that has attempted to cover the expanse of Revelation, but do it in a way that debunks myths, that points out truths, that teaches us how to read the Bible and that convicts us to bring our lives into alignment with what it says. We've asked you to allow and enlist the help of the Holy Spirit in the process by giving you the passages in advance for each Sunday, and invited you to meditate on three important questions that deal with the three types of literature Revelation is: it is apocalyptic, it's pastoral, and it's wisdom literature. That means there are strange images and metaphors and symbols that mean something else, that it holds instruction for us as the church together, and it expects us to think and act in certain ways because of what it says. We've also asked you to give input to the series by letting us know if you have questions that have not been answered or if our answers were sort of confusing, and we will conclude this series with a panel discussion and do our best to answer those questions at that time. So if you do have a question, please fill out that white card and give it to one of us, or to someone in Guest Services and they'll make sure we get it.

Before we jump into today's passage, let me just remind us of an important priority as we read Revelation (by the way, *not* Revelations! It is a singular revelation, not

¹ Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO); Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis); Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>); Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, ed. E Ray Clendenen, vol. 39, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 228-251; John Yeatts, *Revelation*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 181-200; Lewis Foster, *Revelation: Unlocking the Scriptures for You*, Standard Bible Studies (Cincinnati, OH: Standar, 1989), 137-156; George Lyons, "Songs in the Night;" John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

multiple ones!): the term “revelation” only appears once in the book, even though that’s its title. The title comes from chapter one and verse one. Most of what you read and hear these days about Revelation is focused on deciphering the vision – especially in popular culture, whether it is on Facebook or in Christian fiction (by the way, most of what is written about Revelation in Christian books is fiction, whether it claims to be or not!). But Revelation is not primarily about the *vision* as much as it is on *WHO* the vision is about: Jesus, the Christ, the Lion/Lamb of God. The word “revelation” only appears once in the entire book.² Jesus Christ is referred to 33 times in the book in all different ways and names. That’s one and a half times in every chapter of the book. Despite everything else that makes Revelation difficult to understand, “this much is clear: Since the first coming of Christ, God reigns unchallenged in Heaven. And despite appearances to the contrary on earth, (Christ will return) and God wins in the end.”³ This is a book about Jesus Christ, and He is about God the Father’s work of redeeming His world: people and creation. And Revelation shows how merciful and patient God is and how far God will go in the hopes that we will wise up and turn to him and trust in him, as the Bible says:

“The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.” (2 Peter 3:9, nlt)

I want to make sure you heard what I just said, because that’s going to be a key perspective to keep while we look at these two chapters; so I’ll repeat myself: This is a book about Jesus Christ, who is about God the Father’s work of redeeming His world – people and creation. And it shows how merciful and patient God is and how far God will go in the hopes that we will wise up and turn to him and trust in him.

The passage for today starts out with a song. Worship and praise songs are frequent in Revelation, as you’ve seen. This is what chapter 15 says:

“Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished.

And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

‘Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty!

Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!

Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name?

For you alone are holy.

All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.’

² George Lyons, “Songs in the Night”

³ Lyons, *ibid.*

After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. And 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 sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.” (Revelation 15:1-8, esv)

So there is a beautiful song and then the preparations are made for the last set of judgments. I like what Dr. Scott Daniels says about this: “John has been painting his apocalyptic masterpiece with the colors of the great prophets Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, etc. But in this brief interlude before he describes the final fall of Babylon he goes back to his favorite colors – the colors of the Exile from Egypt.”⁴ You remember that the plagues listed in previous chapters reflected the plagues brought on Egypt during the great Exodus. The lyrics to the song in this passage that John records are a combination of two songs: one is the song of Moses that was sung when the Israelites were on the other side of the Red Sea, after it had parted and they were delivered from Pharaoh’s armies (Exodus 15). But there is a new element of a second song – the song of the Lamb. That’s because “the victory over the dragon has come not with the staff of Moses but through the blood of the Lamb.”⁵ Another difference, too, is that the Israelites sang about their victory over Pharaoh, and here the song is a celebration of God’s reign over the nations; it’s not a song that praises destruction of enemies, it is a song that praises God. That’s because God does *not* want the nations to be destroyed. “God’s desire is for the *conversion* of the nations, so that they join in the cosmic chorus of praise that is his will for the world.”⁶ In this song is the consummation of God’s plan to save people. It is a story whose arc runs from the great saving event in Exodus to the greatest saving event of all time: Christ’s death and resurrection. The story line runs through the history of all of God’s dealings with people to the very end of time. It does not exult in the death of people; it exults in God’s justice and holiness, and in the destruction of evil. Maybe you remember the question that was asked all the way back in Revelation 6 by the martyrs who were being protected under the altar (remember them?):

“How long will it be before you judge the people of the earth for what they’ve done to us? When will you avenge our blood against those living on the earth?” (Revelation 6:10, tlb)

These are the same people who are now singing the salvation song of the Lamb and his defeat of the Dragon. God, in his mercy and justice, has answered their question.

And that brings us to the points of these chapters. Remember, we are seeing God’s mercy in doing all he possibly can to see people repent and become part of his family. So with that in mind, these chapters start off being about...

⁴ Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>)

⁵ Daniels, *ibid.*

⁶ Daniels, *ibid.*

1. Judgment

Now I understand that this is a difficult topic today; we don't like to talk about judgment. It's uncomfortable and it's depressing. Our culture accuses those of us in the church of always being too judgmental of them. They are often right, unfortunately. Some churches and Christians forget that their job is to love others and it is God's job to judge others. But I think sometimes the reason the unchurched feel guilty is not because we are judging them, but their own conscience is; we just get blamed for it. But I think that the church has acted out of fear of coming across judgmental, so we've avoided conversations about judgment. But if you've read *any* of the chapters so far and especially the chapters for today you'll see that Revelation is not shy when talking about judgment. There *is* judgment coming whether we like it or not. There *will* be a judgment. We don't like it, and let me tell you our enemy the devil wants us to believe it doesn't exist. I came across a pretty powerful statement the other day from John MacArthur: "Satan continues his efforts to make sin less offensive, heaven less appealing, hell less horrific and the Gospel less urgent." We don't like judgment, but the one who is pleased that we don't want to talk about judgment is the Dragon himself. (Pastor Casey helped introduce us to him in his two sermons.)

When I think of judgment, I think of a time when I was a kid that I got in really bad trouble. Of course, there was only *one* time in my life when that happened, so I don't have a lot of examples to choose from. My parents bought their home when I was around 2 or 3. There were only three houses on our street and a few on the adjacent street, so a lot of the block was a construction area – which is great for little boys! When I was around four I remember watching the big tractors and backhoes working away. I loved going there. One day while I was there, I noticed a little boy who was across the way and he was watching too. I called to him but he couldn't hear me because of the machinery. So I picked up a piece of wood and threw it toward him. I must have been an incredibly gifted young athlete because not only did I get his attention, I hit him in the head with it. He immediately started crying, so being the compassionate yet pragmatic four year old that I was, I ran home.

I thought about whether I should tell my mother about this event, but I knew that she didn't take things like that very well; she really wasn't very mature about those things. So I decided to spare her the stress and not tell her. My plan worked brilliantly; she was having a happy afternoon and no one knew about my assault with a piece of pine. The next morning was great – my mother was in a good mood. She asked me if after breakfast I would like to go grocery shopping with her. I loved getting out of the house, and keeping her company while shopping often meant I would get one of those one-cent candy sticks from the jars up front in the store. So we got to the grocery store and we began making our way up the aisles when my mom ran into some woman she knew; sounded like a neighbor. I wasn't really paying attention until I heard something that caused me a rush of panic and adrenaline and suddenly I heard every word: this woman, this busy body, said, "Did your son tell you that he hit my son in the head with a two-by-four?" My mother

was a good multi-tasker because at the same time that she said, “No, he did not,” she also reached out behind her back without even looking and grabbed me by the arm before I could slip away. Then my mother actually *thanked* this woman for telling her this! I told you she didn’t know how to handle those things. I recall that there was a great deal of really loud silence in the car on the way home. I didn’t even get my candy stick! The silence was deafening. When we got home I got reacquainted with the wooden spoon from our kitchen (I can’t believe she cooked with that thing after it had been on my behind! I told you she didn’t handle these things well!). Then she forcefully held me by my arm and marched my down to this boy’s house and made me apologize – of all things!

I could *feel* my mother’s disappointment and anger in both the silence and in the business end of a wooden spoon. I was forced to take responsibility for my actions. I’m thankful for that lesson...*now*. So when I think of God’s judgment and wrath, I think of my mother.⁷ Actually, that lesson taught me early on that there are consequences for actions, and as in the words of the Bible...

“You may be sure that your sin will find you out.” (Numbers 32:23, niv)!

That is what is about to happen here in Revelation; God can wait no longer. People’s sins have accumulated to the point that their “chickens have come home to roost” (are you familiar with that phrase? It means that the consequences have finally caught up with them).

“The wrath of God consists of two things: First, he allows human wickedness to work itself out, to reap its own destruction. Second, he steps in more directly to stop it, to call ‘time’ on it, when it has gotten out of hand. (Scholar N.T. Wright says,) ‘If we knew our business, we would thank God for both of these, even though both can appear harsh. They need to be. If they were any less than harsh, the wickedness in question would merely pause, furrow its brow for a moment, and then carry on as before.’”⁸

There are a few images that are worth pointing out here: one is the glassy sea around the throne. This is a powerful image of juxtaposition – contrasting the chaos of the plagues with this incredibly calm sea around God’s throne. God is never ruffled by anything! God is always completely calm! And although the believers in Jesus have had to face many, many rough waters and stormy seas in life and through the end times persecution and tribulation, they are finally at smooth sailing. Whatever you are facing is temporary. Even if it lasts a lifetime it is temporary. Keep faithfully following Jesus and introducing him to others because any hardship or pain is temporary.

Another image is the Golden bowls. These were used in Old Testament temple worship, and they tell us that these judgments come straight from God himself. The wrath that was in the seals and in the trumpets was limited, but these are the final and complete judgments.

⁷ While the illustration is my own, the idea to use it this way is borrowed from Scott Daniels.

⁸ Daniels, *ibid*

I also want to point out the smoke and thunder in the throne room. This tells us a couple of things. This brought to mind several key images of the presence of God in the Old Testament (Isaiah 6:4; Ezekiel 10:2-4; Exodus 19:16-18; 40:34-35; Numbers 14:10; Ezekiel 11:23). The point of that is to leave no doubt that these ultimate judgments come from God himself. It also points out that while the “Ark of the Testimony” contained the Ten Commandments in the Holy of Holies of the temple – the place of God’s presence, so does the testimony of the Lamb, which is the Word of God, which is Jesus Christ.⁹

The point of the first four plagues appears to be fairly straightforward. The ancients believed that everything was composed of the four elements: earth, fire, water, and sky, and these judgments cover all of them – speaking loudly to the Greeks and Romans that their entire world was going to be judged. God will allow the natural elements themselves (earth, sea, rivers, and sun) to pass judgment on the human beings who have so grievously abused their position as God’s imagers within creation. Humankind is supposed to be looking after God’s world and caring for one another. But as he did in the Noah story, God will call on the natural elements to turn in upon themselves and judge humankind for its wickedness.¹⁰ Unlike the other judgments that were partially destructive, these are complete. There will be no more to follow. And yet, they are still designed to get people to realize their sin and repent.

Next in these judgments that I want us to see is that we learn about...

2. **Armageddon**

The previous bowls were the culmination of our sins against the natural world; the remaining judgments are a full-on frontal assault on evil.¹¹ This results in a kind of showdown between God and his enemies. People are weakened by plague and then the river Euphrates dries up; this is either natural or man-made, but these two clear the way for access to invading kings and armies from the East. The armies of the kings are recruited by demonic forces that are symbolized by the frogs. The frogs are authorized by the dragon and the beasts, who are using people that are so wrapped up in their sin that they don’t even realize it. These people, in the ignorance that comes with sin, are allowing themselves to be pawns in this cosmic battle against God.

Who the kings are have had many interpretations, including Persian kings or Parthian rulers being led by “Nero redividus” – the myth of Nero returned from the dead (Pastor Casey explained that to us in his messages). Much more highly likely is that “Babylon epitomizes any and all unjust world systems, the waters of the Euphrates drying up represents people becoming disenchanted with it (17:16-18;

⁹ Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO)

¹⁰ Daniels, *ibid*

¹¹ John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

20:8), and the kings symbolize unjust and oppressive world forces preparing to attack God's people."¹²

The final showdown is in Armageddon.

John says that "Armageddon" is a Hebrew term, and it seems to be based on the Hebrew word "har" for "mountain" and the name "Megiddo," which is a place in Northern Israel. I've been to Megiddo – it is a huge valley, not unlike the Yakima Valley. The name "Har-Megiddo" or Armageddon is contradictory because Megiddo is located on a plain rather than on a mountain. It's like he's calling it "The Mountain-Plain." So what is John getting at? It seems clear given the abundance of symbolism in Revelation – especially John's tendency to use Hebrew words and names as key *symbolic* references – that Armageddon is to be taken symbolically and *not* literally. A strong reason for that is because Old Testament references to Megiddo often link it to battles in which the adversaries of Israel are defeated. In Judges 5:19 Megiddo is associated with Deborah's victory over Israel's foes. In 2 Chronicles 35:22 (and 2 Kings 9:27), King Josiah of Judah was killed near Megiddo because he would not listen to the word of the Lord. Finally, Zechariah 12:11 announces the coming day of the Lord's victory, mentioning Megiddo as the place where worshipers of a pagan god mourn. So if we take all of this together, the associations suggest that Armageddon is a *symbolic* place name that is a sign or symbol of the coming destruction of the adversaries of God.

And this is it. There is no more. Things have gone on long enough. Christ is returned to earth. In verse five it says...

"Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments." (Revelation 16:5, esv)

What's missing from that description of God? He is the one who is and who was...but *not* "is to come." That's because he *has* come. This is it. Pastor James pointed that out in his sermon, too. Christ has returned. No more warnings; it is finished. He is the God who was and is and has now come.

But remember that Revelation is about God wanting to give everyone every single opportunity that he can for them to repent and return to a relationship with him because he loves us so much? It's even found in these chapters as one last final warning:

3. ***Stay Awake!***

On the verge of this terrible end of the World War, the third beatitude is given. It's like right before this cataclysmic war breaks out, God can't help himself – he's going to give us one more reminder that we don't need to experience this war, that we can be among those gathered around the serene scene of the throne room. In fact, in some Bibles, this beatitude is in parentheses:

¹² Rotz, *ibid*

“(Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!) And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.” (Revelation 16:15-16, esv)

In that culture, the thought of being caught “exposed” represented the utmost public shame. Whatever you may have done in private and thought you could get away with, well, your mother will be told about it in the grocery aisle!

But we’ve heard this voice before; its sounds very familiar, doesn’t it? That’s because Jesus said a similar thing before:

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” (Matt. 24:42-44, niv)

Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 25:1-13 with the story of the women awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom and then missing it because they weren’t ready. This is what Pastor James warned us about in his sermon too. Have you given up looking for Jesus to return? Do you think it is all a myth? Have you grown lax? Wake up! It’s the same warning Jesus gave to the church in Sardis way back in Revelation 3:

“Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.” (Revelation 3:3, niv)

In the midst of final judgment, there still is a warning of grace. The final three plagues are terrible, but they also reveal how easy it is to give allegiance to the systems that fall under judgment. At this point there is no chance or time for further repentance. Vigilance and faithfulness is serious business in this book.¹³

You and I are going to be held accountable one day for the way we’ve taken care of each other and of God’s creation. We are going to have to account for whether or not we have been faithful witnesses for Christ, being his presence in this world and introducing others to Jesus.

Because one day we are going to face judgment. And we can either be afraid of that day, or we can be around the throne and the calmness of the glassy sea. We can either know we are loved by God or be afraid of being judged by God. Which will it be?

The Bible tells us,

“God is love. (*This is even demonstrated in his continued pleas for us to repent, even when creation is crashing down around us because of our sin!*) Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the Day of

¹³ Daniels, *ibid*

Judgment: In this world we are like Jesus (*Christian: are you being like Jesus? Are you loving and serving the people around you, not judging them? Are you caring for the creation that God has entrusted to you? This is how we can have confidence on the Day of Judgment!*). There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." (1 John 4:16-18, niv)

When all this breaks down that we read about, you will either be perfected in love or petrified in fear. Either option is in front of you. The choice is yours. But let me warn you: there will come a time when it's all done and there will be no more choosing. The choice you make right now might be the last one.

Pray