

Judgement-It's Beginning

Rev. 8:6-13

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As we read and study the scriptures of the OT and the NT, one of the truths that is made abundantly clear is that truth that the Lord loves His people with a steadfast love; and he shows His love for His own in both a positive and a negative way. Positively, the Lord shows His love for us, first and foremost, by the fact that in times past, He sent His Son into the world to be born of a woman and to be born under the Law so that He might redeem those who were under the Law's Curse, so that those redeemed might know Him, His love, His mercy, His goodness, the power of His resurrection, and the inheritance which we have through His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

And so Jesus, while on earth, once told His disciples, Greater love had no man than this, that a man lay down His life for His friends - and then he went to Golgotha and did just that - He died for His friends - and we are His friends, if we believe Him and do what He says.

This, in turn, prompted Paul to write to the Roman Christians in Rom. 5:8 how "God showed His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us". This is how God the Lord, in a very positive way, showed and shows His love for His people. Despite our sinfulness and our rebellion, He looked on us with favor, pursued us in love, showered mercy upon us, and having provided the way of salvation for us, brought each of us who know Him to Him by His grace, through the gospel. What Jesus did on the cross, sealed then, by His resurrection, is the greatest positive evidence of God's love, not only for us but for the whole world (John 3:16).

God the Lord also shows His love for His people in another way however, and this other way is negative by nature. For the Lord also shows His love for His people by protecting them from their enemies, and also, by bringing vengeance - punishment - retribution - upon the heads of those who hurt, and mistreat, and persecute His people. As God's people we are called somewhere the apple of God's eye - so when enemies of His people strike or abuse His people, it is tantamount to them striking God's eye - slapping Him in the face.

By way of illustration, do you recall what Jesus said to Saul of Tarsus, on the road to Damascus, when Jesus appeared to Saul and spoke to him, as he was traveling to Damascus for the purpose of arresting followers of Jesus's way, in order to bring them bound to Jerusalem in order to stand trial for what Saul believed was heresy and blasphemy? We read in Acts chapter 9 how Saul was traveling to Damascus around mid-day, when he saw a great light, brighter than the sun, and he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" To which Saul answered, "Who are you, Lord?" To which Jesus replied, "I am Jesus who you are persecuting".

I am Jesus, who you are persecuting? We know that Saul was not persecuting Jesus literally - for Jesus had already died, had risen and had ascended into the heavens. Saul of Tarsus was persecuting people who believed that Jesus was the Christ! Right? Yes, that is right - BUT, what we learn from Saul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus is that Jesus is so identified with His people that when they are being persecuted, He is being persecuted - when they are being hurt, He is being hurt - when they are treated shamefully, He is being treated shamefully - for He is the head and we are the body - He is the Vine and we are the branches - and our attachment to Jesus and Him to us is more than figurative.

Saul of Tarsus was a chosen vessel of the Lord - and so instead of him dying by seeing the risen Christ, he was saved to become the apostle to the Gentiles - for Saul of Tarsus was one of the Lord's people. But around the time Saul was converted, another enemy of the church arose against the church - and as events unfolded, he was praised by the people as though he was a god, failed to give God glory, and was struck by an angel of the Lord, was eaten of worms and died. That man was a king - Herod - and he felt the vengeance of the Lord

Along these same lines, Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica about this very thing. We know from our study in Acts on Sundays that the Christians in Thessalonica suffered trouble because they believed on Christ; and so in his second letter to that church, Paul reminded them of this very truth, that the Lord took pleasure in bringing affliction and also judgement upon those who took pleasure in afflicting them. Notice 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10.

The Lord shows His love for His people in both a positive and a negative way. He shows His love positively in and through the cross of Christ and by redeeming us, despite the fact that we were rebels against Him; and He shows His love and care negatively by bringing judgment upon the head of those who mistreat, persecute and harm those who have been redeemed and who belong to Him as His people.

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On this backdrop, remember the context of the book of Revelation. John wrote Revelation to seven real life churches which existed in the late first century in Asia Minor; and the letters to those seven historic churches are also written to and are applicable for all churches - for each letter ended with the refrain, He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says, to the churches! What was the situation of these churches in the world? These churches either had faced, were facing, or were about to face, trials and sufferings. And we know from history that this is exactly what took place.

From the close of the first century forward, the early church faced a series of ten major times of persecutions - and these times of persecution were exceedingly bad. In the late first through the second and third centuries, Christians faced being ostracized by their neighbors - some were betrayed by friends - some lost their livelihoods because they were Christians and refused to worship the pagan deities - others lost economic status because the economy of their city was controlled by unbelieving Jews - some were beaten, others were sent to jail and still others were thrown into the arenas to be torn to shreds by wild beasts or used to serve as torches in Nero's garden parties.

With then church facing those situations, how does the Lord show His love for His people? As we saw in Revelation chapters one, two and three, the Lord wrote to assure His people that they were His and that He loved them - that He had them in His hand; and now, as we arrive at chapter eight, the Lord will begin to show His people negatively that He loves them, as He begins to bring vengeance upon the heads of their enemies - and this vengeance, as we shall see, targets both individual wicked people as well as evil nations and the evil world system.

From chapter six, we have seen that judgement was coming. The content of the first six seals showed that - and we saw, especially when we considered seal number four, that the judgement was limited in scope - it would affect a fourth of the earth - but it was nevertheless real. Now, as we begin to study the seven trumpets - which were blown because the Lamb had opened the seven seals, we see once again that judgement against evil people and nations, who persecute God's people, is real and severe, but still only partial. And yet, this round of judgement is a bit more severe than those which came as the seals were opened - and so with the blowing of the first four trumpets are blown, the affect of the judgement released affect one third of that which the trumpets affected. Later still, in Revelation, we will see that the judgements become so severe that they are not rendered by fractions but in full!!

Read with me chapter 8:5-13.

What is taking place in chapter eight? We know from verses 1- 5 of this chapter that after the opening of the seals, there was an interval in heaven - a silence - and we saw last week how silence signaled something - it was the prelude to judgement. We also saw how during this silence, prayers were offered to God by an angel, who offered the prayers of the saints to God in a golden bowl and the prayers were mixed with incense - which we said was the intercessions of Christ, which made the prayers of the saints. Those prayers - which are reminiscent of the prayers of the martyrs which was learned about under the fifth seal - but the prayers also include other prayers - the prayers of living saints - as the saints cry out to God day and night for relief from God against sin and against those who afflict them.

Were these prayers accepted by the Lord? Yes they were accepted by the Lord. How do we know they were accepted by the Lord? We know the prayers were accepted by the Lord because after the angel's bowl was empty (this is implied), the same angel who offered the prayers then filled his golden bowl with fire from off the altar of God and threw it on to the earth, from heaven. And when he threw the fire on to the earth from heaven, there was a response from heaven - peals of thunder, rumblings and a great shaking. The rumblings and tender and the goat sharing show us that the prayers of the saints had been accepted.

Application is here: Do you remember by chance how Jesus taught us how we should always pray, and not lose heart or faint, by telling a parable of a persistent widow and a judge? Look with me at Luke 18:1-8. . .Do you ever pray about situations you face - particular to the evils of the world, or bad things people do toward you because of your faith, or for someone else - like the persecuted church, or a persecuted friend - and wonder whether your prayers are being heard? These images in Revelation 8:3-5 taught the Christians of the late first century - and they teach us - three truths about prayer:

1st, we see from vv.3-4 that the prayers of the saints are collected - the angel has these prayers in a golden censer - and this signifies that the prayers are collected in order to be offered. In other words, our prayers have a cumulative affect - and none of them are lost;

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2nd, we see that the prayers of the saints are offered to God by an angelic intercessor - so as we pray, an intermediary takes our prayers - and as we learned from one of our past lessons, the idea of intercessory angels was a concept held by Jews of the first century and even earlier - and John takes up this idea here in Revelation;

3rd, the prayers receive an answer from the throne of heaven - but all this happens in heaven, unseen by us and unknown to us - and all this happens in the good time of the Lord. Sometimes, we receive an answer speedily - but sometimes, not so speedily - and based on the fifth seal, and what the Lord said to the martyrs, sometimes prayers are only answered after we go into the presence of the Lord - BUT, the important truth to grasp to is this - that **no prayer is lost** - and **all prayer is kept** - and the prayers of the saints, especially for relief from adversaries - receive an answer from heaven, as do all prayers which are according to the will of God.

I have a little book titled A Retrospect - which was written by J. Hudson Taylor, I suppose later in life - and it is a brief account of how the Lord dealt with him as he came to know Christ, as he went to serve Christ in China as a missionary and as the China Inland Mission was founded - and in the little booklet he wrote at one place that looking back, he could not recall one prayer that he and perhaps his wife Maria had prayed, that had gone unanswered - these prayers were not always answered when they wanted them to be answered nor were they always answered like they had hoped they would be answered - but every prayer was answered eventually.

We digress - but I want you to grasp this truth - and we see this truth about prayer in Revelation 8:3-5. Let's move on.

Having been accepted then, in answer to the prayers of the saints, judgement is to begin - and it begins one trumpet at a time as each of the angels blows his respective trumpet - and there is a sequential pattern to the judgements: **Angel one blows** his trumpet - this is **followed by a judgement** - then **angel two blows** his trumpet and this is **followed by a judgement** - and then **angel three blows** his trumpet and this is **followed by a judgement** - and so forth, until finally the **seventh angel blows** his trumpet - and **the fullness of the kingdom is complete and realized (11:15-19)**.

Notice the sequence of the first four trumpets:

Trumpet #1: God seems to assault the land - for hail, fire and blood are thrown on to the earth - and a third of the earth is burned up, as well as a third of the trees and all green grass;

Trumpet #2: God seems to assault the sea - for something like a burning mountain is thrown into the sea - and a third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea die, and a third of the ships are destroyed;

Trumpet #3: There seems to be an assault on the fresh water sources of the earth - for a great blazing star falls from heaven - and the rivers and springs of water are affected and made bitter - that is, poisoned;

Trumpet #4: God seems to launch an assault on the luminaries of the heavens - for the sun, the moon and the stars are affected/struck - and their light is diminished by a third and a third of the day and a third of the night are kept from shining.

What in the world do these trumpets and their results signify? Is the impact on the earth and the other parts of the natural world a literal impact, or are these pictures symbols of something real that will indeed take place, but not exactly equivalent to the images given in John's vision? That is the crucial question, isn't it? Before we move into the detail of each of the first four trumpets, let's answer the literal vs. symbolic question.

Honestly, beginning at chapter eight, commentators divide. Up until chapter eight, it is not so crucial that one answers the questions about literalism vs. symbolism. But once we arrive here, we must answer this question before we can move ahead. And as I said, commentators are divided on this question.

For example, R.C.H. Lenski - who was a Lutheran commentator back in the early part of the last century, sees everything in chapters 8 to 11 as symbolic - while Robert Thomas, who was a professor at the Masters Seminary says, in his two volume commentary on the Revelation, that everything is hard literal. What this means is simple:

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According to Dr. Thomas, every thing described in vv. 7 to 13 will take place exactly as it is recorded - meaning, there will be real hail, fire and blood thrown on to the earth from heaven at the blowing of the first trumpet and as a result, a third of the earth will be burned, along with all green grass and a third of the trees. So in that scheme literal trees, literal grass and the real earth will be affected - as will the rest of the natural world spoken of in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th trumpets.

Lenski sees all the images as figurative - symbolizing the false religion from the old paganism, to new delusions beyond the old paganism that will not accept the gospel, to the advance of religious delusion which will ultimately permeate every aspect of unbelieving human society.

Matthew Henry, OTOH, sees trumpet #1 as a terrible storm - whether a storm of heresies, a mixture of monstrous errors or the tempest of war;

2nd trumpet - the great mountain as a leader or leader of heretics - because 'mountain' is often used in scripture to denote either a leader or a nation; or he says it could mean the destruction of the city of Rome - which was sacked five times and finally by Alaric in 410 AD with great slaughter - 1/3 of the population of Rome was allegedly killed by Alaric's forces;

3rd trumpet is either a political or ecclesiastical star - who spreads error as poison instead of good doctrine;

4th seal is seen to be the guides of government or the leaders of the church - who are to dispense light and influence but instead mix light with darkness.

Which is the right understanding? Time will not allow me to get into the detail of this tonight - but I chose to discuss this question just a bit in order to whet your appetite for next week. But in the time remaining, let me leave you with two points to ponder, which will prime the pump for next week:

First, keep in mind that the Revelation is a of a particular genre - and the genre is known as "apocalyptic".

Next, apocalyptic literature has some specific characteristics. Apocalyptic writings communicate broad concepts, and NOT specific detail, like an epistle or a history communicate.

Further, apocalyptic writing communicates broad concepts via visions, and symbols and images - and the purpose is to show the cosmic battle raging between God and light versus evil and darkness - in order to encourage the good guys to persevere against the bad guys because ultimately God wins.

And finally, when we compare how the OT prophets used language - when they made apocalyptic statements; and when we see how Jesus used the same sort of language to predict and explain coming judgement - we see that NO, the symbols expressed in Revelation chapter 8 do not denote religious error as Lenski says, nor do they denote literal and supernatural cataclysm like Thomas thinks - but rather, they denote calamity - that is true - but the symbol denotes calamity that will really take place, as it did in the OT period.

Let me give you an example. Look to Matthew 24:29. Keeping this language in mind, look with me at Isa. 13:9, 10, 13; 24:23; Ezek. 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31; Amos 8:9. . .do you see the similarity between all these passages? In apocalyptic writing, darkness and luminaries ceasing to shine is used to denote coming calamity - and in the case of the OT the calamity came as a result of war against Israel and Judah which results in their respective captivities. BUT, there is nothing in recorded history that shows that what the prophets spoke LITERALLY happened.

OTOH, the sun looks blood red when it is shining through an abundance of smoke, due to massive fires on the earth - fires such as would be set when a large city is under siege, as Jerusalem was.

Symbols are also used in other ways. Notice the third trumpet. A great boring star falls from heaven and poisons the fresh waters and springs. Is this a literal star or is it something else? Compare this verse with 9:1 - what do you see in the text? What was the star? An angel? Compare 20:1 - is the angel in 20:1 the same being as the one in 9:1? They both have the key to the bottomless pit - so they are probably the same angel.

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And so, are these descriptors literal or are they symbols that denote something a bit different than what they appear to picture? I am convinced they are symbols that denote something other than what they appear to picture - and when we come together next week, I will show you in some detail what each trumpet reveals - by comparing OT and NT scriptures to what John wrote - and then, the meaning will become much clearer.

In the mean time, know this - first, your prayers are heard and are kept and will be answered - though perhaps not in the time you would have them answered in - so pray and don't loose heart;

And second remember, the Lord shows His love for His people in two ways. The first is through the cross, where he bought us with a price because He loves us with an everlasting love; and second, by bringing vengeance upon the enemies of His people - for to be an enemy of His people is to be an enemy of the Lord - and He is not an enemy anyone should want - so if you do not know Him or if you are not sure whether you do or not, make peace with Him while you are able - for a time may come when the opportunity for peace is past - and if any are unsure where they stand with the Lord, talk to me - I will be happy to talk with you about your eternal destiny.

Amen.