

## Who can Judge?

I have no doubt that there are two kingdoms at war with each other for final dominion of this world. We know which side we're on and who we want to win that battle. But when we're in the middle of the world, immersed in the money-making, bill-paying, news-watching, grocery-shopping, car-parking world of getting by, it's actually quite easy to lose track of the war that's going on all around us, the battle for human souls that rages between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness.

But, ultimately, the war will be over. That much is clear from the book of Revelation. There is an end coming to the rebellion that has gone on since before the sin of Adam and Eve, the rebellion that started with Lucifer wanting for himself the worship that belongs to God. When it ends, there will be a judgment and it is this final judgment that we must look at today.

If you're like me, you don't get much pleasure from reading accounts of plague after plague bringing death and destruction to multitudes of people. Today we're not going to focus in on the specific details of these judgments, but we'll stand back from the scene and try to capture some of the lessons from these last chapters of human history.

In the first place, we see that this section of visions begins with something being opened. Remember after the seven letters to the seven churches that John saw a door opened into heaven. And then, at the end of chapter 11, we read:

*Then, in heaven, the Temple of God was opened and the Ark of His covenant could be seen inside the Temple. Lightning flashed, thunder crashed and roared; there was a great hailstorm, and the world was shaken by a mighty earthquake. (11:19)*

So, the most holy place of the Temple is opened -- that's where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. This was the place where God made His presence known to His people Israel, and His presence is affirmed by lightning & thunder.

Well, again in chapter 15, we see something that has been opened:

*Then I looked and saw that the Temple in heaven, God's Tabernacle, was thrown wide open! The seven angels who were holding the bowls of the seven plagues came from the Temple, clothed in spotless white linen with gold belts across their chests . . . The Temple was filled with smoke from God's glory and power. No one could enter the Temple until the seven angels had completed pouring out the seven plagues. (vv. 5,6,8)*

The opening of the door and the opening of the Temple are indications that John has visual access -- he is being given the privilege of seeing the mysteries of God unfold.

Like the thunder and lightning of chapter 11, the smoke that filled the Temple here is a sign of God's presence. And where God is present, His holiness will impact all that surrounds Him. In this case, there are seven final plagues to fall on the earth, measured out in the seven bowls of God's wrath.

It's tempting for the world around us to accuse God of having anger issues, of being "over the top" in His condemnation of human sin and in His judgments against us. That's because we rationalize our failures and forgive ourselves for things that we think of as being not too serious. But there is something in behind human failing, a rebel force that seeks to undermine and finally destroy God's Kingdom -- and that force is represented in the book of Revelation by the dragon, by Satan, the power of evil that operates on this earth. What we might take lightly, God takes seriously, because He knows its source and, if His Kingdom is to come and His will is to be done on earth as it is in heaven, that spirit of rebellion has to dealt with.

This final round of plagues is said, in 15:1, to bring God's wrath to completion. There is a finality about it, a closure to the whole dimension of warfare that has gone on between God and Satan, and those loyal to the Lamb and those loyal to the dragon and his beasts. This is what is signified in the pouring out of the seven bowls of plagues. The statement that these plagues "complete" God's wrath is a great encouragement to all of us. It means that those evil forces that have opposed God's Kingdom and His work of redemption, have been defeated and that God has no more reason to be angry. The wrath of God is over and a glorious new day awaits.

I'm not going to go over the plagues in detail -- they are remarkably similar to the plagues we have seen with the seven seals and the seven trumpets. There is water turning to blood, destructive hailstones, darkness over the land, fire -- again, these are reminders of the plagues God sent to Egypt with the goal of causing Pharaoh to repent of holding God's people in slavery. But in Revelation, there is no longer any desire among people to repent. Here are the relevant texts:

*They cursed the name of God, who sent all of these plagues. They did not repent and give Him glory (v.9)*

*They cursed the God of heaven for their pains and sores. But they refused to repent of all their evil deeds. (16:11)*

Instead of repentance, there is a proud and angry response to the plagues God sends on the earth. Three demonic beings inspire the rulers of the world to gather for battle against the Lord on the great judgment day of God Almighty (16:14). This gathering of rulers happens at a place known in Hebrew as Armageddon, but before any actual battle can take place, a mighty shout comes from the throne of the Temple in heaven, "It is finished!" This is the shout of Jesus on the cross, where it signified the completion of His atoning work, paying the price for human sin. Here it is the signal that the judgment of God is now being completed.

One other comment on the seven bowls of God's wrath containing the seven plagues: notice the progression of these plagues in each sequence, starting with the seven seals and finishing here. With the fourth of the seven seals, the damage was limited to one fourth of the earth's people. With the first four trumpets, the damage was limited to one third of the earth's resources: water, land and light. But here, the plagues affect all who have the mark of the beast. The ante is being raised.

After the last of the seven bowls has been emptied and after a massive earthquake

and a terrible hailstorm, the chapter closes with the human response to God's demonstrations of judgment: people cursed God (16:21).

Do you see how this progresses? God gives people the opportunity for people to repent, to turn from their sin and to accept His lordship. He puts more and more pressure on us to accept His verdict on our rebellion and to change our ways, but pride leads to defiance, and defiance to final judgment. At the end there are only two camps. In the one camp are those who worship the Lamb and who have surrendered their lives to God Almighty. In the other camp are those who have resisted and resisted and who now are firmly opposed to God and His rule. They feel as though their freedom to rebel against God is more important than living under His protection or obeying His commands. They have sided with the dragon and with all who oppose the Kingdom of God and they are unwilling to humble themselves and repent of their sin. These are the ones who will say to the end, "God's judgment? Bring it on!"

And, at this point, we have to ask the question, "Who else besides God could possibly be equipped to judge the world?" Does any human being know enough about the hearts of our fellow humans to judge whether or not they should be given a free pass, or even if they want one?

There are several indications that we've already come across that suggest that there are people who would prefer to live on without God, who will consciously and willfully reject His offer of grace right to the end. Does a just God force people who prefer Satan's rule to live under His?

This brings us to the two chapters that deal with the fall of Babylon, chapters 17 and 18. Already in chapter 14 we have heard one of the three angels that flew in mid-air and that angel called out:

*"Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries. (14:8)*

And in chapter 17, we read about a woman who is called the great prostitute. A mysterious name is written on her forehead and it is "Babylon the Great, Mother of all Prostitutes and Obscenities in the World." She is described as being drunk, drunk with the blood of God's holy people who were witnesses for Jesus. An angel later tells John that this woman represents the great city that rules over the kings of the earth. (17:18) This city is built on seven hills, which would make the first-century listener think of Rome, but the word for "hills" could also be translated 'mountains', which would represent a complete number of kingdoms, or of successive rulers that stood against God.

In either case, we're getting used to symbols in Revelation, and Babylon the city, or the woman who is mother to gross immorality must stand for something; they represent something beyond just the city of Rome. She is described in ways that point to a more widespread power than just the empire of the day. Her description includes great power -- she sits on a red beast with seven heads and ten horns -- we've seen that same description before of the dragon and the beast from the sea.

This is a formidable power. She is also a figure of wealth, prostituting herself to the rulers of the world. She represents sexual immorality and rebellion against God's holiness. She is an enemy of the church, drunk with the blood of God's people, even though she wears the clothing of a religious person. Linen will be described as "the righteous acts of the saints" in chapter 19 and the Old Testament priests wore gold, purple and precious stones on their priestly garments. So what's going on here?

She represents a great deception, because John says, "I stared at her completely amazed," and the angel asks John, "Why are you so amazed?" John is in shock because the woman appears to be a religious figure, maybe someone within the church, but she stands opposed to God's Kingdom and seeks to destroy those who serve Him. The same word for "amazed" is used in describing people's reaction to the beast from the sea, who had what appeared to be a fatal wound, yet whose wound was healed. People were so amazed by this event that they began to worship the beast. The angel is here rebuking John for even beginning to admire the woman for her supposed spiritual position or attributes. She is like the Jezebel in the church of Thyatira who was encouraging the people in the church to eat meat offered to idols and to engage in sexual immorality -- she will be judged because she represents the invasion of Babylon into the church of Jesus Christ.

Think for a minute about what represents power and authority in our world today. Isn't it political influence backed up by whoever has the biggest guns? Isn't it commercial power and who holds the largest share of the wealth of the nations? Who is trying to gain more and more power over your life, your finances, your political will? Isn't it the ones who already have immense power and control over the individuals they govern? Sweden may be the first of many countries to become a cashless society; their banks already pay negative interest rates. In other words, you pay them to keep your money safe. But, as we saw last year in Cyprus, the government can withdraw money from banks in the case of any "crisis" they devise, and a cashless society just makes that easier. I could give so many examples of how individuals are losing freedoms and rights today and how governments are exercising greater and greater control -- all for our own good, of course.

Combine this with an ethical standard that is no longer based on Christian morality, laws and court interpretations that pressure us to adopt, or at least tolerate, behavior that was once considered immoral, and we see the state pushing the fellowship of Jesus-followers into a corner. To give an illustration, a 2006 opinion poll showed 68% of Canadians believed that prostitution was immoral. In a 2009 online survey by Angus Reid that number had dropped to 58% and in a 2012 Ipsos Reid poll only 45% agreed that prostitution in brothels should be illegal, while 55% of Canadians thought it should be legal. Now, those are different forms of surveys and different questions were being asked, but the trend is obvious, and it is following a similar path to the trends regarding euthanasia, or mercy killing, and a host of other social issues. The point is that this is how Babylon works - it rejects the values of the Kingdom of God, pushes those who hold those values to the margins of society and convinces as many as possible that this is justice.

It would be wrong, I think, to equate Babylon with politicians or with judges or even with members of the media. Rather, it represents the spiritual forces, the demonic presence, that is behind those powers and which influence people who are in a position to make decisions that effect us all. Babylon is everywhere and it is supported by people who love the world, even in the church.

But, now, watch what happens next. Still in chapter 17, we read that the beast and his ten kings, hate the prostitute and conspire to destroy her. This is how it works with evil. The pride and desire to dominate are part of what turns things bad. The self-centredness, the hatred and the jealousy don't stop when evil confronts good, but are still in effect when evil faces evil. And so Revelation 17 says that evil will conspire against the Lamb, but will first turn on itself and destroy the harlot called Babylon. And the red beast and the kings who serve him do so, not on their own initiative, but according to God's plan, as the angel tells us in verse 17.

Chapter 18 begins with the announcement that Babylon, the great city, has fallen. It includes this description:

*She has become the hideout of demons and evil spirits, a nest for filthy buzzards and a den for dreadful beasts. For all the nations have drunk the wine of her passionate immorality. The rulers of the world have committed adultery with her, and merchants throughout the world have grown rich as a result of her luxurious living. (18:2-3)*

The demonic realm has been the force that has guided Babylon through the ages. It has tempted people with money, with material goods, and with the power that go with these things. It has drawn people in, enticed them to worship physical things instead of the God who made them. Babylon's demons have insisted that the people who live under their authority will worship money and power and the lies that prop them up. To belong to Babylon means to live in rebellion against God. To prosper under Babylon's rule means to worship her, to love her, to give one's life to serving her interests.

Most of the rest of the chapter is a series of descriptions of those who mourn the fall of Babylon. The rulers of the world who enjoyed the luxuries of stolen wealth mourn her in vv. 9 and 10. The merchants mourn the loss of their best customer from verses 11-17. The ship-owners and captains and crews stand at a distance and weep as the smoke ascends from Babylon. Their lament is simple: "She made us all rich from her great wealth. And now in a single hour it is all gone."

But in the final scenes of the chapter are the voices of those who do not mourn. Apostles, prophets and God's holy people are not grieving, because, finally, justice has come. Here is the final verdict on Babylon, from a great angel who speaks at the end of the chapter:

*Her merchants, who were the greatest in the world, deceived the nations with her sorceries. In her streets the blood of the prophets was spilled. She was the one who slaughtered God's people all over the world. (18:23,24)*

This is, finally, the answer to the cry of the martyrs, "How long, O Lord?" Most of us

cringe when we read of plagues and judgments, coming in harsh reality and utter finality. But, we also cringe when we read about Isis beheading Christians and others in Syria and Iraq. Are we really okay with the idea that there will never be justice for those who commit such crimes against God and people? But the real question we are asking is, "Does God have the right to punish those who oppose His Kingdom? Is He just to exclude people from His eternal Kingdom who never wanted to be part of it while they lived on earth?" The answer seems simple: of course He does, and it's only just for Him to exclude people who do not want to serve Him. But what about all the blood and gore, the thunder and lightning, the calamities in the heavens and on the earth? Are these violent events really the works of a loving and merciful God? Yes, they are. A loving God does not tolerate the barbaric treatment of people who are intent on doing good. A merciful God does not allow an unending line of cruelty towards those who have chosen to lay aside their selfish agendas in order to pursue His righteous one.

God has to judge the world because justice is necessary and because there is no one else who is able to bring it about. No one knows what God knows. No one can understand the motives of a person's heart except his or her Creator. God has to judge the world because without judgment, there is no end to evil and no place that is safe for those who have chosen good. God's anger at evil is poured out on the dragon, the beasts, the demonic forces that cause pain and division and fear and hatred and, when He is done, so is evil. Judgment clears the air and allows for the glorious new heavens and new earth that we will soon see.

Three final points:

There is a warning in chapter 18 for all who follow Jesus, and it's a warning about our relationship with Babylon:

*"Come away from her, my people. Do not take part in her sins, or you will be punished with her." (v.4)*

We are not to be fully "at home" in this world, not in love with the things the world values, not captive to the desire for money or power or any created thing. Our hearts are to belong to Jesus and our lives given to honor Him.

2. Evil really is evil. The forces that are at work behind the scenes are not part of some fanciful conspiracy theory - they are real spiritual beings and they have a real impact on how the world runs, the direction it's heading. Again, we have to be on guard so that Babylon doesn't capture our hearts and lead them away from Jesus, no matter how enticing or seductive the lies of the enemy might be.

3. Finally, we should never be embarrassed that God is the One who will judge the world. He is the only One who can and we should be relieved that He will. Judgment will produce justice and justice will bring us peace and joy forevermore. Abraham once said to the angel of the Lord in Genesis 18:25, "Will not the judge of all the earth do right?" And the answer is, "Yes, He will." Trust Him.