

A Thief in the Night

By Brad Allison on 8/8/2004

Scripture Reference *Revelation 16*

The chapter before us today is about the judgment of God. One of the odd things about this chapter is Jesus' interruption of these words of judgment with a pronouncement of blessing upon all those who will be ready for his judgment. He utilizes this familiar illustration in which he says his coming will be like that of a thief at night. Since a thief doesn't phone ahead to tell you what time he will arrive, there's only one way to be ready for him: you must be prepared every single night. No right thinking person would say, "Well, the thief didn't come last night, so I don't need to worry any longer about locking my doors." Jesus says that his coming is like a thief in that no one knows what time he will come, and the only way to prepare for his arrival is to believe at all times that he might come immediately.

So the question we should all ask ourselves is the one Jesus tells us to ask. Are we ready for his coming in judgment? Do you believe those words we repeat often in the Apostle's Creed when we say of Jesus that "he will come to judge the living and the dead"? Do you believe in it like you believe in gravity? There is such a thing as an intellectual assent, in which a person just assents to something in his mind. But there's also an experiential belief in which we believe something deep in the soul. Every single one of us believes in gravity with more than an intellectual assent. This belief is at the core of our being, keeping us from taking a shortcut from a second story window by simply stepping out into the air fifteen feet above the ground. Sometimes our belief in gravity makes us just a little fearful. If you're out hiking and you see the path turn near the edge of a cliff, you instinctively become more careful in where you're stepping. Those who like to rock-climb use the fear to increase the excitement. But all of us believe in gravity at a deep level. If we would be ready for the judgment of God, as Jesus urges upon us here, we need to believe in it as much as we believe in gravity.

An air conditioner repairman came to the church on Friday to repair one of our units, and he told me a remarkable story. He knew of another repairman once who was on the roof of a building to repair its AC unit. The unit was located near the edge of the roof, and when he went to open the case to inspect it further, he didn't see the wasp nest that was there. The wasps came out and stung him, and in his effort to get away from them, he stepped off the edge of the roof and fell to his death. There may be issues that seem just as compelling to you as an army of angry wasps coming at you, but nothing ought to displace the reality of judgment brought by Jesus. This is what Jesus urges upon us in this passage. Blessed is the one who stays awake spiritually and is found prepared when Jesus comes. In order to help us be prepared for that day that is just as certain as gravity, I want us to notice three things about the judgment of God that we see in our passage. Judgment is holy, natural and insufficient for repentance.

I. God's Judgment Is Holy

C. S. Lewis once pointed out how modern man has put "God in the dock." The dock he's referring to isn't the wooden ramp that extends out over a body of water, but rather the place where an accused criminal stands in the courtroom. God is questioned and asked to give a defense for being a god who allows such things as war and disease. The trial may end with exoneration, but the point is that man has become the judge and God the accused. The extreme irony of this is that one of the crimes of which we have found him guilty is that of claiming to replace us as the ultimate judge. Despite the modern mindset that denies God this role, the Scriptures are quite clear in describing God as judge. And those who are closest

to him and who see things most clearly, the angels in heaven, marvel at the holiness of his judgment. They say, “Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments” (5). Instead of seeing his judgments as cause to condemn God, they see them as cause to praise him.

The judgments he brings here are in the form of pouring out the contents of seven golden bowls. We’ve already come across the seven seals and the seven trumpets. The book is now moving toward its climax, and the bowls portray a judgment far more complete than the trumpets. For example, when the second trumpet was blown, a third of the sea became blood (8:8). But now, we read that when the second bowl was poured out, the entire sea became as blood so that every living thing in it died (16:3).

Why is the judgment of God likened to the pouring out of God’s wrath in a bowl? There are at least two things in view here. First, a bowl is used to gather something up in larger quantities than could be carried without it. More can be fit in a bowl than in your cupped hands. The wrath of God is stored up and poured out in abundance at this judgment. You can’t reason that because God’s judgment is not seen now, that therefore it doesn’t exist. Robert Ingersoll was a well-known atheist who used to say to his audiences, “If God exists, I invite him to strike me down right now.” When the invited stroke of judgment didn’t come, he would then use that fact to make the point that God didn’t exist. But the Bible says that God is storing up his wrath, to be poured out at his appointed time of judgment.

A second reason he uses this image of the bowls comes out of the Old Testament. Golden bowls were used by the priests to remove the ashes left from the burnt offerings on the altar of the temple. The altar is where the wrath of God gets transferred to a substitute offering, and the substitute gets judged in place of the real guilty party. Or to say it differently, it is where God purifies through judgment, the precise thing that is happening here. God is here purifying the earth through judgment. It is really the answer to the question asked by many: “Why doesn’t God do something about all the evil in this world?” The reason he has so long delayed in doing something about it is that he is full of mercy, because when he does a job he does it completely. The only way for God to take care of evil is to do away with all evil, as we see him doing in this passage.

Application: We need to apply this truth about judgment before moving on. If God is the one who judges, and his judgment is holy, then we don’t have the right or the power or the knowledge to judge. Some try to say that believing in a God who judges leads to a violent lifestyle. The truth is exactly the opposite. It is only when we believe in a God who judges that we can refrain from doing so ourselves. If you lose a son to a suicide bomber, only the knowledge that God is the true judge would empower you to live a life of peace, refraining from retaliation. Or, to bring it closer to home, knowing that God is the true judge allows us to refrain from retaliating against a spouse, a boss or a neighbor when something they do hurts us.

II. God’s Judgment Is Natural

Notice how four of the first five bowls describe ecological disasters. The sea is turned into blood like the blood of a dead man, coagulating and rotting. The result is that all the creatures of the sea die. Then in the case of the third bowl the rivers and springs also turn to blood. Finally, when the 4th bowl is poured out, something that had been screening the harmful effects of the sun is removed and people get scorched by the sun. Then the fifth angel pours out a bowl that causes complete darkness to descend on the earth. In these ecological disasters we see a common feature of God’s judgment. It is a reversal of creation. What I

mean by that is that these judgments begin to roll back the process of creation that is recorded in Genesis 1. When man sins, everything begins to disintegrate and to revert back to chaos. Genesis 1:2 describes what the earth was like before creation. “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep.” Remember that the fifth bowl was the pouring out of darkness upon the earth, the exact situation that existed prior to creation. So these bowls portray for us creation gone berserk. Instead of the beautiful harmony that existed after God completed his work of creation, everything now begins sliding back into chaos.

This feature of judgment as a slide back into pre-creation chaos is a common feature of God’s judgments throughout the Scriptures. It’s present in the ten plagues visited upon Egypt by Moses. It’s also present in Romans 1, where the creation order of marriage between a man and a woman disintegrates into same-sex relations. God’s judgment allows our lives to disintegrate into chaos. It’s not hard to see the application of this to our own lives. When you sin, you unleash the forces of chaos in your life. Let me give a couple of illustrations.

Illustration #1: Several years ago, a story was reported about a tenant farmer who had worked hard for many years to improve the quality of the land he farmed. On one occasion during the renewal of his lease, the owner informed him that he was going to sell the farm to his son who was getting married. The tenant had been saving money to buy the farm for himself, and he made several generous offers in an attempt to reverse the owner’s decision. But it was all in vain. As the day drew near for the tenant farmer to vacate the land he had worked for so many years, anger and bitterness got the best of him. So he gathered seeds from some of the most pesky and noxious weeds he could find, and then spent many hours scattering them on the clean, fertile soil of the farm. He also collected as much trash and rocks as he could find and scattered them as well. The very next morning the owner informed him that plans for his son’s wedding had fallen through, and therefore he would be happy to renew the lease. In the same way, all of our sinful actions lead to a similar result: our own harm.

Illustration #2: Earlier this week, I was filling out claim forms for our prescription drugs when I noticed that one did not have the proper claim information on it, an omission that would have prevented reimbursement to us. Immediately assuming it was Wendy’s fault, since she was the one who had picked up the prescription, I called her to ask her about it. But I must confess that I was just a little angry, which fact she picked up on immediately. Angry words like this, no matter how successfully we attempt to mask them, will unleash the forces of chaos on a marriage.

Illustration #3: One of our Bible study guides contains a South African children’s song about a crocodile. “Boo hoo hoo, I’m a lonely croc, lying all day on a sunny rock. I want friends, oh, with all my might, but nobody likes my appetite. Down in the river, deep in the grass, I wait for someone nice to pass. I’ve eaten all the friends I’ve known, maybe that’s why I am so alone.” It’s possible that the chaos of loneliness has descended on your life as a result of the sin of using people instead of loving them.

We could give many more examples of this. But in general the principle is that if you live for anything other than God, a process of disintegration will begin to take place in your life. If you live for a house or any kind of possession, it will destroy you. Your relationships will suffer and in the end all your possessions will be destroyed and you’ll wake up to find yourself a lonely fool. The nature of judgment is to unleash the force of chaos and to ruin everything.

III. God’s Judgment Is Insufficient for Repentance

We read twice in this passage that their response to these judgments was a failure to repent (vv. 9, 11). One would think that such astounding displays of God's judgment would lead people to repentance. But it doesn't, and it never has. We can still see the insufficiency of God's judgment to lead to repentance today. As we pointed out above, we see the judgment of God whenever people's lives begin to disintegrate as a result of sin. But we all know people who see the damage sin does to their lives and yet keep on sinning. We think of the alcoholic, the workaholic, or the approval addict who is always seeking the approval of other people. Addicts see the self-destruction and continue anyway.

Another way of saying this is to say that you can't scare a person into heaven. No one ever made it to heaven because of believing the message, "You better watch out, or God's going to get you." This needs repeating, because many people try to scare people into heaven even by the use of this book. The message goes something like this: "All these terrible things are going to happen in the last days, and we may be getting close to the last days. There's going to be a big war, famine, plagues and great suffering. Even more dreadful, eternal suffering will come upon those who don't trust Jesus. If you don't come to him now, these terrible things will happen to you." Nothing in that message is wrong, but it also won't lead people to repentance. Again, you can't scare someone into heaven. It's not that a fear of judgment is inappropriate; it's just insufficient for salvation. There is no love for God and no faith in it.

If we are to repent, something else is needed. Paul said it like this: "God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance" (Rom. 2:4). Where do we see the kindness of God in this passage? We see it in the judgments of the bowls when we remember that Jesus endured the judgment of God in our place. Do you remember what Jesus said when he was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane? He asked the Father to allow this cup to pass from him. The cup of which he spoke was the cup of God's wrath, similar to this language about the bowls of God's wrath. Jesus asked not to have to drink it, and God said no.

And remember too the darkness. Many years before the darkness recorded in Revelation 16, there was another time when darkness enveloped the world. It happened at the crucifixion of Jesus. This darkness means more than just nighttime. It refers to a deep experience of isolation. Notice the response made in Revelation 16 to the darkness. "People gnawed their tongues in anguish and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores" (v. 10-11). Such a response indicates a deep isolation of soul. Pre-creation chaos and Judgment Day pain came upon Jesus at his crucifixion that we might escape it. Such is the kindness of God.

CONCLUSION:

We need to apply this now, and I want us to do it in the way the text instructs us. We are called to stay awake and be ready for his arrival like a thief in the night. We do so by maintaining a lifestyle of repentance, so let's repent right now. It's really not that difficult. Consider first any way in which chaos has descended upon your life. Perhaps you are isolated from others because you have been using people. Perhaps your finances are a disaster because you've been looking to buying things to make life manageable for you. Perhaps your marriage or your family or your job is falling apart because of your sin. I want you to understand and believe, just as much as you believe in gravity, that Jesus has taken that chaos upon himself. He has loved you and stood in your place to receive the judgment your sins deserve. And now you go free. Simply receive that gift from him, and in that way prepare yourself for the judgment of God. "Blessed is the one who stays awake."