

GOD'S WORD TO A SENT PEOPLE REV 16:1-21

Ravel's Bolero <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8po7FZonP-I>

That's the first of our little bit of culture for the day! One of the things I like about this piece of music is the way in which it gradually builds, starting quietly and gently to being quite intense, powerful and strong by the end. That's how I see what's been happening in Revelation. Just as it was with Bolero, the further on we go the greater is the intensity—and we especially see that in this chapter. In many ways, what we see in chapter 16 is nothing particularly new. We've already had fire, hail, earthquake, blood, plagues, drought, death, demons, pain, suffering. But here it's almost like a staccato of judgements, one after the other in rapid succession.

So what is it describing? Where does it fit in the scheme of things? Once again, we need to be careful about timing, but given that 15:1 says that with this series of seven God's wrath is complete, we can reasonably assume that this is primarily referring to future events associated with God's final judgements on the world. While there's every chance elements of it are already happening, it is mainly referring to that time when God will pour out his final judgement. There's a lot that's dark in this chapter, but there's a lot of light for the people of God. I don't want to go through this bowl by bowl, but I simply want to highlight a few things.

God's Judgement

Firstly, it's very clear that these judgements come directly from God himself. The voice ordering the judgements comes from the temple [1] and we also hear the voice of the altar in the temple [7]. The centre of the temple is symbolic of God and his presence, so the judgements are ordered directly by God. But as I read this chapter, I realised that there was something very significant that had been part of the other series of seven judgements, but was missing in this one. Apart from an incidental reference in verse 6, there is no mention of any of these judgements affecting God's people. The whole focus of this chapter is on a fallen creation that is against God and on those who have the mark of the beast and worship his image [2]. There's no reference to those who have the seal of God on their forehead and no reference to the 144 000. They simply don't appear in this chapter. In many ways this is a very dark chapter because it's one judgement after another, but the fact that none of this affects the people of God is a cause for hope, comfort and joy. This is God's righteous justice in action, dealing with sin and all that's wrong in the world. This is him finally putting things to right!

The New Exodus

In previous chapters we have seen very clear allusions to the Exodus event of the Old Testament, and especially the way in which God dealt with those who were oppressing his people and brought them to a place of rest in the promised land. The hope for us is that the allusions indicate that a whole new Exodus is underway, of which we are a part. In terms of allusions to Exodus, this chapter is no exception:

- Boils and abscesses [2; Ex 9:9-11].
- Sea and water to blood [3, 4; Ex 7:20-21].
- Darkness [10; Ex 10:21-29].
- Drying up of water [12; Ex 14:21].
- Frogs [13; Ex 8:1-15].

The impression I get is that this is a repeat of God's actions against Pharaoh who had hardened his heart and wouldn't let the people of Israel go. It is the final series of judgements that directly lead to the escape and rescue of the people of God. These judgements are directed at equally hard hearted people. But the end result is just as effective: just as God's judgements ended with the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt to the promised land, so these judgements will result in the safe passage of God's covenant people to the promised land of a new heaven and new earth and eternity with him.

Hard Hearts

God's judgements were fearsome, but we have seen that their purpose was always to bring people in repentance back into a relationship with him. That is always their purpose, right up to the very last. But such is the hardness of people's hearts that instead of repenting, all they do is curse and blaspheme God [9, 11, 21]. We tend to think that people, when faced with something horrific, will turn to God. I'd like to think that that's what I would do when faced with something as fearsome as God's judgement. But we can't assume that to be the case at all. For instance, in the world wars there may

have been occasions when church attendance increased, especially in connection with specific situations, but my understanding is that the overall picture was that attendance actually dropped. I know that there were men who came back from the war who had nothing further to do with church or faith. Obviously those things don't apply in every instance but they do give some insight into the human heart. The fact is that there are many who are entrenched in their rebellion towards God and hatred of him. Even in the face of extreme judgement, they still refuse to repent and worship God, cursing him instead.

Just Judgements

Here is a second cause for hope for the people of God – the very fact that God does judge. You may have seen this piece of news this week.

Amanda Knox http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjkligat_rw

Regardless of the rights and wrongs in the case, I'm sure Amanda would be very pleased with the Italian justice system which she would obviously see as having been just in vindicating her innocence. As far as she was concerned, justice was seen to be done. That's similar hope to what we can have in the fact of God's justice – it will be done, and that's a cause for praise [5-7]. If God were to either ignore evil or leave it undone, he would not be a perfect God or loving God. He must oppose evil and all that comes against his holiness and humanity as it is meant to be. Therefore his judgements are an expression of his just and righteous nature and so are a cause for both thankfulness and praise because we can be confident that justice will be done.

There's also something else here regarding God's judgement.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lp6czeTuNEU>

Because they had poured out the blood of the saints in their persecution, God was giving them blood to drink as part of his judgement of them. This is a case of the punishment fitting the crime. We often think in terms of God's judgements being like lightning zapping from heaven. No doubt there are occasions when his judgements are something of that order. But one of the worst judgements that we could perhaps ever face is being left to our own devices. How do you think the world would fare if justice was totally left in the hands of people. It would be very scary!

Armageddon

I got a surprise this morning. As I was going through the passage again I realised that I hadn't said anything about Armageddon. I then thought, that suits me fine, that means one of the others will have to do it while I'm on holidays! It's not something I've ever looked into to any great extent, so I had a look to see what else was said about it—only to discover that verse 16 is the only reference in the entire Scripture! With the amount of things that have been written about it over the years, you would be forgiven for getting the impression that it was one of the key scenarios of Revelation. It's even filtered into secular thinking. In fact, I discovered that it's happening in Melbourne in a couple of weeks' time! <http://armageddonexpo.com/au/>

We have this picture of a massive battle happening at some point near the end, and there is some justification for thinking that based on verse 14. But let me give you my take on it. All it simply says is that the angels gathered all the kings of the earth at Armageddon. Then, the seventh angel poured out his judgement and a voice, again from the temple, called out, "It is done!" That was followed by lightning, thunder and a massive earthquake i.e. these were events of earth shattering significance (no pun intended!). The great city was split into three, the cities of the nations collapsed, every island fled away, no mountains could be found and huge hailstones fell. What this says to me is that if there was a battle, it was very one sided! The destruction of the cities is symbolic of God striking at the very heart of the human system and evil, and in so doing his judgment on it all was complete.

Watch!

One final thing. It surprised me in my bible, which is a words of Jesus in red edition, that verse 15 was in red i.e. spoken directly by Jesus. While this series of judgements is directed against Satan and the world opposed to God, Jesus reminds us that he comes like a thief. This accords with what Jesus had to say in Matthew:

Matthew 24:42-44 (NIV)

⁴² "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

What he is saying is that we need to be constantly alert so that we don't end up like the soldier who, when the alarm is sounded, doesn't even have time to get his gear on and runs away naked. We are to stay awake—obviously not literally—but remain spiritually discerning as to the times and to what Satan and his mates are up to.