

Therfield Chapel
September 7th 2008
Revelation Chapters 8 and 9

Although my text is Chapter 9 tonight, I'm going to draw on Chapter 8 as well as really they are apiece – they go together

And we're going big-game hunting – we're looking at some big and serious themes

Gordon Bridges was a Church of England minister who I once heard preach

He tells the story of a lady who began to attend his church and who was on a journey out of atheism

She was interested in Christianity but she was struggling

And one day she came to see Gordon in his study and told him she'd been reading her Bible and was appalled because she'd come across numerous passages that spoke of the wrath of God

She told him she had no problem seeing God as a God of love but the idea of Him being wrathful she found horrifying and incomprehensible

And then in front of Gordon she pulled her Bible out of her bag followed by a pair of scissors

After opening her Bible at the dividing page between the Old Testament and New Testament, she proceeded to cut her Bible along its spine until she had two books in her hands

Then she put the OT in the bin and gave Gordon the NT

“Preach from that” she said, “because you'll only find a God of love there”

Now I wonder whether that lady had read these chapters of the New Testament – or many others for that matter – for here we find a catalogue of events that reveal God pouring out his wrath upon the earth

And that's what we're going to think a bit about tonight – the wrath of God

Let's just recap on where we've got up to in the Book of Revelation

We started off in Chapter 1 by considering a vision given to John of the resurrected Lord Jesus whilst he was imprisoned on the Island of Patmos

Then in Chapters 2 and 3 we studied the letters to the seven churches – each one receiving encouragement and rebuke from the Lord Jesus as he moved through the churches

Then in Chapters 4 and 5 John is invited up into heaven to see the world and history from God's perspective – he 's given a God's eye view of history we might say

And in that vision we see a Lamb in heaven being worshipped

And so three week's ago we saw how the vision teaches us that the cross is the apex of history

That this Creation can be thought of as a theatre with numerous parts of a play being performed

But the part of the performance that eclipses all the other parts is the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus

In fact we can't understand any of the rest of the play without seeing and understanding that climatic scene

Everything that happens before and afterwards takes its meaning and is given significance in relation to that event

It is the main event in history

Indeed in the sovereignty of God, He has arranged the whole of history around this event

And that's why we can't finally make sense of reality or history without reference to the slain Lamb

And so those chapters remind us that from our side, the need for us to have our sins forgiven and be reconciled to God dwarfs all our other needs

And that's why we find the Slain Lamb the focal point of the worship of heaven by those who are the redeemed company

And then in Chapter 6 we find that same Lamb – the Lord Jesus – breaking six of the seven scrolls of history – each one revealing something terrible

Invasion and conquest; battle and bloodshed; famine and death; Christian martyrdom and cosmic disturbances

They're all there in Chapter 6

And I suggested that rather than us seeing these things as a vision of the end of time we should see them as the constant companions of the people of God through the ages

The point that's being made is that the Lamb's rule and authority is not thwarted by these horrors – rather his reign is in spite of them and even that he uses them to serve his purposes

Chapter 7 in an interlude in the story – there we see another scene where the people of God are gathered from every language and people-group to worship around the throne

And then we're up to date with chapter 8 – where we find the missing seventh seal which when broken reveals seven angels - each one blowing a trumpet

Now we're forced to ask the question: what's the pattern?

We've had the seven seals and here we find the seven trumpets and later we'll find seven bowls in Chapter 16

Is this a chronological account of human history?

I don't think so

Let's imagine that you follow a football team though the season and are so keen that you go to all their matches both home and away

By the end of the season you've seen every minute of the team's football and you've seen it in sequence

But let's imagine that the club's camera crew make a DVD about the season

They can't fit all the matches on the DVD – and who would want to watch them all anyway?

So they show highlights – perhaps the top ten goals; the top ten tackles; the top ten free kicks and so on

They show action replays with different angles from different cameras

Those making the DVD are now not too interested in sequence as much as in the bits that matter

And I think that the Book of Revelation in these chapters is a bit like that

Probably the seven seals and the seven trumpets reveals the same thing but from a different angle

Let me explain what I mean

The opening of the seals – especially the four horsemen - reveal the horrors of history; they reveal what happens when human beings go their own way – and the result is war and famine and conquest and so on

The seals consider these horrors as having human origin

But the trumpets seem to reveal that many things that happen in world history are the result of God's judgement in action

Now the cause is not sinful human activity – it is also God at work in judgment

Or put another way the seals reveal the trials of the church whereas the trumpets reveal the same horrors them as God's judgements on the world

So with the seals and now the trumpets, we're looking at similar events but from a different angle – or from a different camera

And the new angle adds something to our understanding

George Caird writes:

“The unity of John's book, then, is neither chronological nor arithmetical, but artistic, like that of a musical theme with variations, each variation adding something new to the significance of the whole composition. This is the only view which does adequate justice to the double fact that each new series of visions both recapitulates and develops the themes already stated in what has gone before.”¹

So let's pick things up in Chapter 8

Verse 1

“When he (that is the Lord Jesus) opened the seventh seal there was silence in heaven for about half an hour”

Now up until this point, there has been the constant sound of loud praise and worship in heaven

But when the Lamb breaks open the seventh seal John tells us there is silence

It seems that all the hosts of heaven are hushed in dread anticipation of the judgements to follow²

¹ The Revelation of St John the Divine, p106.

² Geoffrey Wilson, New Testament Commentary Vol 2, P520

This is the calm before the storm

The time when heaven holds its breath, such was the trauma of what is about to follow

It takes their breath away

Perhaps they like the woman we thought about a few minutes ago they are shocked at the coming wrath of God

Perhaps they're surprised at what is about to happen

I was once told the story of two cousins – called John and Samuel - who had a big argument

And in his anger John was about to punch Samuel

And Samuel said, “You wouldn't do that – you wouldn't hit your poor cousin would you?”

Sometimes we think about a bit like God – “you wouldn't do that”

You wouldn't judge

I think that often we have better ideas about how God should be than He has about Himself

And perhaps there was a little sense of that in heaven – they were stunned at God's plans

Or maybe they were just awestruck

We don't really know

So let's think about the trumpets and the judgements they bring

The first thing to note is that they are related to the prayers of the people of God

Turn back to chapter 6 verse 9:

“⁹When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. ¹⁰They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" ¹¹Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.”

And then here we read:

Chapter 8:3

³Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. ⁴The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. ⁵Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

The text is making the point that the wrath that God is about to unleash on the earth is at least partly in response to the prayers of God's persecuted people for vindication, and dare we say it revenge, for what has been done to them

It's as if the judgements fulfil the prayers of God's people

Perhaps we should be careful what we pray

Now flick over to Chapter 11 verse 15:

Look what follows the sounding of the seventh and last trumpet –

¹⁵The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever."

Here we seem to have the end of this world – the fulfilling of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is on heaven"

It's as if by then the cries of the Lord's people have now been fully answered – the reign of Christ has come

And how does it come about?

How does the kingdom of the world become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ?

By the judgement of His enemies – in response to the prayers of God's people

Interesting isn't it?

And so what do the judgements we find here involve?

There are six of them in these chapters (7th one is in a later chapter) :

I'm not going to read them from the passage but will summarise them for you

The first four seem to be directed at the sources of life³

(1) Trumpet One (verse 7) – called scorched earth

This trumpet seems to bring about natural disasters on the earth, tornadoes, earthquakes and volcanoes which bring loss of life – hence the reference to fire mixed with blood

(2) Trumpet Two (verses 8 and 9) – polluted seas

This brings about sea disasters, destruction of fish stocks and the loss of vast numbers of ships (probably a reference to the destruction of trade)

(3) Trumpet Three (verses 10 – 11) - contaminated water

Here the result is polluted rivers with bitter water, draughts and floods

(4) Trumpet Four (verse 12) - Signs in the heavens

So here the sun and stars turn black and there is reduced light

Now we should note that all of these four judgements are against nature but the three to follow seem to be directly against human beings

And that's probably why chapter 8 ends with an eagle calling out in a loud voice: "Woe! Woe! Woe! To the inhabitants of the earth – or more accurately and interestingly Woe, woe, woe to those who make their home on earth"

So the point is that the judgements which follow are not directed against all the earth but against those who belong to this fallen world – those for whom this world is their home and those who care nothing for God and great eternal realities

(5) Trumpet Five (Chapter 9: 1- 11) - Satan and the locusts

Here a star – who almost certainly represents Satan – falls to the earth and in the words of one commentator: "All hell is let loose"

He [Satan] opens an abyss or a shaft and out comes smoke and locusts

These locusts have stings on them and they strike those who are not God's people

And the result is that men seek death to escape what is happening but don't find it

The language is metaphorical – suggestion of destruction and suffering

(6) Trumpet Six (Chapter 9: 13-19) A scene of war and destruction

³ Geoffrey Wilson, New Testament Commentary Vol 2, P521

Here we find 200 million mounted soldiers; and fire and smoke coming out of the breast-plated horses' mouths

Perhaps what John is describing is a scene of modern warfare in terms of the language categories that he knows

What we know is that one-third of the world are killed

And then the passage concludes in verse 20 with:

“²⁰The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. ²¹Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.”

It's not happy stuff

As I prepared for this sermon I came across an American preacher who after preaching on Revelation 8 found a note in the offering plate which read:

"Kindly see to it that your sermon presentation is more entertaining and concise."

And the following week he said in his sermon:

“I am sure that note was sincere and well-intentioned. Probably many of you feel the same way about my messages. I, too, strongly sympathize with those sentiments. I wish there was some way to make these messages more entertaining, and, although I struggle to make them concise, I probably could use some improvement in that area. [he was very gracious]. But I remind you that we are dealing now with what the Old Testament prophets called "the great and terrible day of the Lord." I find it difficult to make such messages amusing or entertaining. It strikes me that to attempt it would be somewhat analogous to hiring a comedian to entertain the witnesses at a public execution! This is not entertaining material, I grant you, but it is true! And we have to face unpleasant truth at times”⁴

Wise stuff!!.

So that's the text – now let's do some reflecting on these two chapters and draw out some comments and lessons:

(1) How should we understand the wrath of God in the Bible?

Now is the wrath of God something to be appalled at as many are?

⁴ Ray Steadman, online sermon library.

Is it credible that God can be both loving and wrathful?

Many people feel that the God of the Bible is a monster

Paul Rydon has read to you from Richard Dawkins before

So let me quote you Thomas Jefferson, America's third president:

“The Christian god is a three headed monster; cruel, vengeful and capricious. If one wishes to know more of this ranging, one only needs to look at the calibre of people who say they serve him. They are always of two classes: fools and hypocrites”

Let me offer some thoughts on the wrath of God – something that whether we like it or not is found right through the Bible

Now many people make the mistake of thinking that God's wrath is like human wrath – which includes malice and vindictiveness and revenge⁵

And from the outset we need to clear that one up

“God is not a bad-tempered being who likes to get his own back on people and who when His purposes are crossed by rebellious human beings gets his own back by losing his temper, showing wrath and dealing them a heavy blow”⁶

It's probably true to say that some preaching that went on in the past – perhaps even now – was couched in these terms

So we must not confuse the wrath of God with the wrath of men

But how should we understand it?

Well God is a Personal Being and He has personal reactions to things

Imagine that you or I had a son and we loved him and nurtured him and gave him the best of our time and money

But as he grew up, all he did was to spurn that love

He never expressed one jot of gratitude; and doesn't return any affection at all

In exchange for love only hates

If we were in that situation as his parent, wouldn't have a personal reaction to our son

⁵ David Pawson Sermon on Romans 1: 18-32 I am indebted to Pawson for what follows here

⁶ Ibid

And in a similar way God made us as His image bearers

We were created to reflect God's goodness, truth, righteousness and love

But instead of finding these qualities in His creatures, He actually finds hatred and malice and violence and adultery and numerous other perversions

His children grossly distort and defile His image
Wouldn't you expect him to have a personal reaction to that?

A reaction to the evil that He finds in His creation?

Or another illustration

Imagine that you come home one day and find that burglars have entered your house and have trashed it completely

Wouldn't you be angry at the way in which your home had been violated?

A home that you'd laboured over and made just as you wanted it?

And because this world is God's world, He has a reaction; He created a world that He called good – and very good - and we the human race vandalised it

And now He looks down and finds men and women working hard to erase Him from His own world

A world where He is not thanked or known as He is

“A holy God cannot remain indifferent to the sin and evil of men”⁷

And He's determined to put things right

God is a moral being and He reacts to sin and evil and is in the process of expelling them from the world He has made

And part of his reaction is in wrath: His settled and controlled opposition to and hatred of all evil and rebellion

During World War Two Winston Churchill and the US President Franklin Roosevelt met on the new British Battleship The Prince of Wales on 14th Aug 1941

There they each signed the Atlantic Charter - a vision for a new post-world world

⁷ Ibid

Now even in Aug 1941 there were still repeated calls both in Britain and the United States for a negotiated peace with Nazi Germany

And there on that ship Churchill and Roosevelt made a pact with one another that they would never make peace with Germany – ever

As far as they were concerned there was only one solution to the problem of Nazi Germany – total annihilation of the its regime

And there they agreed that in time their armies would go all the way to Berlin – to the citadel of Nazi power and remove its leaders once and for all

And as we know by 1945 that's what happened

And in a similar way God will never negotiate with evil or sin

He will never make terms with Satan or those who rebel against Him – but has planned the day of their final destruction

And part of that process is his ongoing judgment of a sinful world

People often say that the lesson of history is that history teaches us nothing

But that's not the case according to the Book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation teaches us that history teaches us a lot about God

That we have to acknowledge that some – probably not all – but some events of history – some natural disasters and wars and political events are the judgments of God

We learn from our Biblical history that God judges people and societies that set their faces against Him

Didn't Jesus Himself say:

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life for God's wrath remains on him” (John 3: 36)?

And the people Paul:

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom 1: 18)

In the West we often see ourselves as more moral than other nations

And I think that there are some good things about Western societies (having lived in virtual lawless and corrupt state in Africa)

But we shouldn't forget the sins of the West – and they are many

We abort millions of babes; millions of couples live in sin and spurn marriage; we see semi-naked women flaunting their bodies on our streets day in day out; the internet is saturated with pornography; we see unbridled consumer greed; the celebration of homosexual experiences; children taught about sex in our schools when they are still learning to read; vast abuse of alcohol; corporate greed in companies; terrible violence on our streets

And of course we mustn't forget the ultimate sin of so many in our society – that of rejecting the Christ the Son of God

We are ripe for judgment

And for those with eyes to see we see judgment at work around us every day

These things mustn't rest lightly upon us

I heard about a Christian doctor in America who made just this very point

He said that if he tells people that if they don't repent they will be judged by God and might go to hell for all eternity they shrug and say "whatever"

But if he tells them that if they don't change their lifestyle and get more exercise and stop smoking their health will badly suffer, they immediately straighten up and listen

His point is that for many in our society – even for us at times - eternal realities weight very lightly upon us – and we need to reconnect with them

We need to let them shape our thinking

First point: a rational for the wrath of God

(2) The trumpets are a warning

Bob Cotton reminded us last week that trumpets provide a clear and sweet sound

Being tine deaf I would know

In the Ancient World a trumpet would be sounded in the market place before an announcement was made by a public official

The trumpet was to make people listen and sit up

And these trumpets – the action of God’s wrath – are designed as God’s instruments of discipline – to make us rethink, to make us reflect, to make us reconsider; to look for bigger meanings when our little meanings evaporate in the face of pain and suffering

“They’re sent to arrest our attention⁸

Disasters chill our blood. They alarm us. They scare the living daylights out of us when they’re close to home

They force us to face unpleasant facts about ourselves

To plan more carefully. To live more thoughtfully

Judgments strip away our illusions and restore us to reality

They teach us that we are really not in control

That we do not run everything about our lives. We are not autonomous creatures.

We learn that we’re not little gods after all, capable of making anything we want to of ourselves, as the media keeps trying to tell us.

That we’re not in charge”

They teach us to repent

These are the lessons we should draw when we see earthquakes and tsunamis and terrorist outrages and countless other things

And yet sadly we find in verse 20 (chapter 9) that there was no repentance following these judgments and chastening

In Luke 13 we have the account of Jesus talking to some people about a tower falling down, seemingly killing eighteen people

And Jesus asks the question: “Do you think that they [the people who died] were worse sinners than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish”

I’m sure that that phrase made it into the book ‘The Hard Sayings of Jesus’!!

But Jesus is making the point that terrible events are a warning and should lead us to repent

They’re a reminder that life is brief and fragile

⁸ Ray Steadman – I am indebted to him for what follows

That God may be angry and we better be afraid

In those now famous words of CS Lewis:

““God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. Pain is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world”

Let’s make sure we listen

The trumpets are a warning

(3) There will be justice

The third lesson of these chapters is that the perpetrators of evil will not get away with their crimes

We learn that God settles accounts

You know usually it’s only people who live lives of peace and security who are appalled that God is a God of justice and wrath and judgment

If you talk to people who have suffered at the hands of those more powerful than them you will invariably find the opposite – a terrible indignation if God is not a God who ensures justice at the last

The fact is that if there is no judgment, evil doesn’t matter

Perhaps the reason we balk at the idea of the wrath of God is that we’ve never suffered or seen much evil

Here’s a picture of the bodies of Jewish people carried out from a gas chamber during the Holocaust

Isn’t it reassuring to know that there’s God who records everything – that nothing escapes Him – a God who will hunt down every perpetrator of evil and bring him to justice

I’m glad that God is angry about sin and evil

It means that there will be a day when sin and evil be eradicated and a world of righteousness established

(4) The Cross

The wrath of God leads us to the cross where Christ bore the full and unrestrained wrath of God that we should never have to

And that takes us unto the communion

STOP