

**Therfield Chapel**  
**16<sup>th</sup> November 2008 PM**  
**Revelation 16**  
**The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath**

It's been a depressing week for news

On Tuesday the story broke that three people in London had been convicted of causing the death of Baby P – the boy's mother, her boyfriend and their lodger

As a father it the incident was very 'close to the bone' for me – especially since the boy in question was two months younger than my son Edward

Baby P didn't live very long

It seems inconceivable that human beings – especially the boy's mother who seemed to turn a blind eye – could stoop so low as to torture someone so small and helpless to death

According to the BBC's website the full extent of the boy's injuries have not been made known to the press – they are simply too disturbing to be disclosed

What we do know is that when he was found in his blood-splattered cot, he had at least a broken spine, eight fractured ribs, extensive bruising, severe internal injuries, a ripped ear

It seems that he was treated as a punch-bag by the mother's sadistic boyfriend

The convicted three have yet to be sentenced

But all week we have seen a collective cry of outrage – much of it directed at Haringey Social Services and at local doctor who failed to examine the little boy in hospital because he was too grumpy

At the trial the judge ordered that the mother and her boyfriend's name be kept from the public

But on Friday both names were disclosed by someone on the internet and soon lots of people knew them

Within hours chat rooms had been set up on Facebook to discuss what should be done to them

One Facebook group was entitled "Death is too good for [the mother's name]; torture the bitch that killed Baby P".

Another that carried her name said "Baby P killers should be hanged drawn and quartered".

The pages contain graphic threats of violence to the three as well as listing their addresses

Goodness knows what will happen to them in prison

Now moral outrage is a normal part of being a human being – we get incensed about certain acts of evil

Our moral outrage is one of those things that is very difficult for atheists to explain

Why is that?

Well atheists generally tell us that life is an accident and that we evolved from very primitive life forms to our current condition over the course of millions of years

And what in their view was the driving force behind the process?

Well, simply, the survival of the fittest – the strong survive and the weak go under

And according to most Darwinists in the end there's no such thing as ultimate morality – reality is in fact amoral – the absence of any moral principles

But if that is true why, in the world should we be bothered about evil?

Listen to the atheism's leading evangelist Richard Dawkins in his book *River out of Eden*:

“In a universe of blind physical forces, and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil and no good. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is and we dance to its music”

Now if that is true and Dawkins is right that the universe is meaningless, how can we possibly say that anything is evil?

Isn't any definition of evil just the invention of society and therefore can just as easily be redefined by another society in the next country?

It would be interesting to ask a Holocaust survivor what they think of Dawkins' quote – that some people have to get used to being hurt – that in effect the murder of 6 million Jews was simply nothing more than an expected consequence of evolution

After all DNA neither knows nor cares and we dance to its music – and so when the music says that one race should promote its survival by the attempted eradication of another race that's not a lot we can do about it

In Dawkins' world it's difficult to avoid the conclusion that we live in a universe where:

The strong will use and destroy the weak

Where big fish will eat small fish

Where tall trees will block out the light from small ones and they will die

Where the Hutu's may seek to wipe out the Tutsis in Ruanda

Where Baby P's mother's boyfriend may use his superior strength to torture and kill a weak and defenceless baby

And there are no moral issues involved

That's just how we're wired, we just dance to music of our DNA and the fittest survive

As someone wisely said, "If there is no God, anything is permitted because there is no one to deny permission"

In America a few years ago a man climbed into a tiger's cage at a zoo and the tiger killed him

He learned by experiment that that's what tigers do – they kill people

It would be dumb to ask, "What's wrong with the tiger?"

And so could it be that in regard to Baby P there are no moral questions involved – no matters of right and wrong – these things just happen – that's just the way that the world is

We shouldn't ask why – it's a question

Now I know that many people today conclude that there can't be a God because there is so much cruelty and suffering in the world

And it's a question that we need to address

But it's possible to look at the world of suffering and our response to it and to draw very different conclusions

Why – the question I want to ask is why, if we inhabit an amoral universe, why are so scandalised in the face of evil and suffering?

Why are we so angry when the fittest do survive and the weak suffer at their expense – isn't that just evolution in action so why should it bother us?

If Dawkins is right and some people get hurt and some get lucky why are we so bothered – as this week has demonstrated so vividly?

Surely our outrage is misplaced; it's irrational and a bit silly?

How can Baby P have been so wronged if there is no such thing as wrong?

Now I want to suggest that our moral outrage at evil in fact points to the existence of God – to a God whose universe is charged with the notion of right and wrong

I want to suggest that the reason that we are so outraged at injustice is because we are made in the image of a God who is moral and we are a bit like Him

It actually makes sense to think this way

If we can recognise evil then we must also have a concept of good to compare it to

We Christians are in a position to explain right from wrong – because what we think of as ultimately good is in one sense equivalent to God Himself and evil is the opposite of Him

But the point I want us to realise tonight is that when we as moral creatures are scandalised by evil we get an insight into how God Himself feels about evil and sin and oppression and injustice

We are sinful people and therefore our moral faculties are marred and desensitised

But if God is completely pure and holy and righteous, it doesn't take much imagination for us to recognise that He might care far, far more about evil and sin than you or I ever will or can

And it's with that thought in mind that I want to come to this passage tonight

This is yet another passage about the wrath of God - as someone here said to me recently - the Book of Revelation is about little else

But tonight I want to build on my introduction and look at the wrath of God in a way that I haven't done before

What I want to do – initially at least - is to suggest a reason why God's anger and judgement is not that surprising – that it is actually to be expected

Take a look back into Chapter 15 verse 5

<sup>5</sup>After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened. <sup>6</sup>Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues.

What's interesting to note in the context of this sermon is that the angels with the seven plagues containing the seven bowls of wrath come out of the Tabernacle of the Testimony

Now if you think back to the Old Testament – and the book of Exodus - you'll remember that the Tabernacle was built as the place where God was to dwell

And once it was completed, the Glory of God - the Shekinah Glory - came down and filled the Tent

But what was the very centre of the structure called?

It was called the Holy of Holies

Now we know from other verses that the tabernacle the children of Israel built was only a copy of the one in heaven – the one we find here in Chapter 15

And I think a point is being made that we mustn't miss

The bowls of God's wrath emerge from the Tabernacle – they seem to emerge from the Holy place

The place made holy because God resides there

Now in the Holy of Holies there were the two tablets of stone upon which was written the law of God

And the law of God in the ark of the covenant continually testifies not only to the moral nature of God but also against us since we are all breakers of that law and will face judgement

I often think about that verse from Habakkuk where we read of God, (AV) “Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity”<sup>1</sup>

Now the verse doesn't mean that God is squeamish and can't bear to look at sin – no – it's quite the opposite really – it means that He as a holy God cannot see evil and not judge it

And since there's a whole lot of sin and evil in this world we would expect Him to bring His judgements upon His Creation

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<sup>1</sup> I: 13

The lesson that we need to learn from the reference to the Tabernacle from where the bowls of wrath come is that it is God's holiness and eternal law that results in his judgements

Sin and evil causes God to cry out for judgment

Sin has scarred the fabric of the whole universe and without its destruction there will never be a perfect world

Sin attempts to unseat God and replace Him; sin is treason against His rule

It is probably true to say that we all have underestimated the depth and seriousness of sin

Now, thinking back to our outrage at the murder of Baby P

If we – with only a vestige – of God's image left in us are enraged at evil – how much more so God?

God whose nature is absolute purity and righteousness

When we see sin as it is –as God sees it - we shouldn't be surprised that the Book of Revelation informs us there's a lot of judgement in the pipeline

What we find is God rising up against sin and we see his absolute determination to eradicate it from His universe

When God judges sin He is in effect challenging the rule and reign of evil

So I suggest that when we read about these judgments – and all of the rest of them in the Book of Revelation we should see them in this light

That our response to injustice and evil gives us a window into why God is outraged at it and judges it

That's really my main point tonight – really a key to understanding the whole book I suppose

Look at the Chapter briefly

### **The Seven Bowls of Wrath**

Now the bowls that are being poured out seem to represent God's final judgement

Look in verse 8 (Chapter 15)

<sup>8</sup>And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

If you think back to the judgments we have seen before they began with the sounding of a trumpet

Trumpets in the ancient world – you’ll remember – we used as a warning

Those acts of judgement it seems were to bring about repentance

But here we find bowls not trumpets – bowls whose contents are simply tipped out – and it appears they are punishments rather than warnings

So how do we know that they occur at the end of the world?

Well they are essentially the last acts of judgement on the earth that we find in the Book – they are the prelude to the fall of Babylon – the world system

It seems that after these bowls have passed God’s anger is spent

We should note that that in the days of the children of Israel in the Wilderness, when a plague broke among the people someone would run into the Tabernacle and beseech God that it be withdrawn<sup>2</sup>

But here we find that everyone is forbidden from doing this now: verse 8 “no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.”

It’s as if God’s wrath had to come and be spent – and no one could stop it

### **The Plagues (emerge from the bowls)**

There are seven plagues mentioned here

Now in some ways there are parallels with the plagues that God via Moses sent to judge Egypt before the Exodus

In that case there were ten plagues – rather than the seven we find here - and the emphasis there was God judging a people (the Egyptians) for their oppression of His people the Israelites

And the plagues paved the way for deliverance for God’s people – we find the same theme here

Like all of God’s judgement on the earth in the Book of Revelation – they are at least partly a response to the way in which His people the church have been treated

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<sup>2</sup> I got this thought from a sermon by David Pawson on this passage

That's why the martyrs appear so frequently

In Exodus the target of the judgements was Egypt – here it is Babylon

There Egypt stood against God and defied Him; here we find Babylon doing the same

There Egypt was destroyed; here – very shortly in Chapter 18 we find Babylon destroyed

To stand against Almighty God is to sign your own death warrant<sup>3</sup>

And what are the plagues that we find here?

I don't want to dwell on them much – have done that before

Except to say that there as well as the plagues of Egypt – there are parallels with Jesus' teaching about the events that will occur in the run- up to the end of the world

Another indication that we are near the end of the world

In one sense these plagues represent creation being undone<sup>4</sup>

It's as if the world itself is being used as a weapon against those who oppose God<sup>5</sup>

But I think as always that these plagues should be seen as symbolic rather than literal

(Plague 1) Verse 2 Painful sores on those who carry the mark of the beast

(Plague 2) Verse 3 The sea turned to blood and every living thing in the sea dies

(Plague 3) Verse 4 The freshwater rivers and springs turn to blood

And then we have an interlude where one of the angels proclaims that God is just

It's as if he is announcing that God is fair in what He is doing in case there's any doubt

(Plague 4) Verse 8 Darkness on the earth and we find people cursing God, refusing to repent and glorify Him

(Plague 5) Verse 10 The kingdom of the beast is turned into darkness and again men curse God and refuse to repent

(Plague 6) Verse 12 The River Euphrates dries up which opens the way for the kings of the East who – along with other kings – gather for battle at a place called Armageddon

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> John Rickardson, Revelation Unwrapped, p53.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

Armageddon is a plain in Israel – probably not a literal place

Winston Churchill was convinced that the final battle of World War II would occur here – sent a team of officers to draw up battle plans for it

I think this – the battle of Armageddon - is probably symbolic of the attempt by the world system to destroy the people of God

(Plague 7) Final judgement: Lightning, thunder, hailstones and a massive earthquake

Here Babylon is given the cup of God's wrath to drink

And men still curse God

It seems that even in these dark times that there will be some – perhaps a majority - who will go down fighting God rather than submitting to Him<sup>6</sup>

There's one other thing to note before I make some final comments

Look in verse 15

<sup>15</sup>"Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed

Here right in the middle of all the judgments is a reminder to the saints to be ready for the return of Christ – a reminder that he comes like a thief (unexpectedly) and we are to be ready for him

This is almost certainly confirmation that this section is dealing with the period up to the second coming of Christ – a time of judgement and destruction like the world has never known before

Perhaps then there will be the temptation to forget Christ and go into survival mode – and so here is a reminder that we should keep our clothes on us – probably the clothes of Christ's perfect righteousness that he graciously gives to those who believe in him

## **Two Final Lessons**

(1) We need to have a healthy fear of God

I have a close friend called Nick who is gifted as a bold evangelist - he used to preach the gospel on the streets week by week

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

Now I'm not certain that street preaching is a particularly good method of evangelism these days – but that's not my point tonight

Once Nick was standing on a bench in the centre of Manchester preaching

And a policeman came over to him and said, "Get down"

So he did and the copper said, "Do you realise that you are scaring these people?"

And Nick's reply was: "These people need to be scared – there is a judgement coming"

And he was right of course – as part of our gospel witness we need to warn people of God's coming wrath

Rico Tice – when he's preaching often says – what's the best illustration to describe this world – it's the Ship the Titanic – we're eating, drinking and feel safe and secure (just like those on that boat in 1912) and yet heading for destruction

People today say things like, "I'm not a sinner"; "I've never hurt anyone" – they need to be reminded that sin is a lot of things – but ultimately sin is rejecting Jesus the Son and the One who sent Him

And they're a lot a people in our society in that camp

(2) The judgement of God always points us to the cross

We thought a little earlier on about the outrage that God feel towards sin and evil

And how if we as images of God feel outrage at evil – how much more God when He's a billion times more morally sensitive than we are

The lesson of the Book of Revelation and indeed of the whole Bible is that God is bothered by sin – more than we can ever imagine

And that presents each one of us with a problem – because we've all sinned – and that puts each one of us into the firing line of God's serious displeasure<sup>7</sup>

It's quite impossible for any one of us to stand before God and survive a tribunal with Him – and that's what we're all heading

We desperately need someone to stand between us and the holy wrath of God to absorb God's anger and judgement

And Jesus is that Person – he stands between us and God and is judged in our place that we might be pardoned

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<sup>7</sup> Dick Keyes *ibid.*

I remember reading the autobiography of a man who had been in the SAS – the Army’s elite troops - and while he was there he became a Christian

And soon he found a ministry talking to his fellow-soldiers and those who’d left The Regiment

He records in his book how one day he’s in a pub in Hereford (where the SAS were based) and he bumps into a former member of the regiment

And they talk for a while and it transpires that the man is seriously depressed and disturbed

He tells him, “I’ve done something so terrible that I can’t live with myself – with all the guilt and the shame”

And so Frank says glibly, “God can forgive you”

And the man says, “No, not even God could forgive what I’ve done – it’s so bad”

And he explained that he was fighting with the SAS in the Far East in the early 1960s

It was hard jungle warfare and SAS were desperate for information on their enemy

They soon found that captured soldiers proved highly reluctant to talk

But, explained the soldier, the SAS developed a highly efficient way of making them talk

They would take 6 captured soldiers up to 6,000 feet in a helicopter and chuck one of them out

Then they’d start a stop watch and inform the remaining five prisoners that one would be thrown out every minute until they talked

And not surprisingly they did

And this man told him (the author) that he couldn’t sleep – for it was his job to throw those men out of the helicopter –and that when he closes his eyes at night all he can see is the terror-stricken faces of the men as he tipped them out of the chopper

He was haunted by what he’d done and even more seriously was afraid of what God would do with him when he met Him

And this young Christian as a messenger of the Gospel was able to explain to him that God has charged His own Son with that crime and at Calvary has punished him for it – so that he might be pardoned

Yes the wrath is real and terrible but no one never need fear his wrath – because all the moral anger and indignation against your sin and mine is spent on the of Calvary

And as I said last week our interpretation of this Book must be controlled by understanding of the cross

Let's pray