

February 20 2000
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**FOLLOWING CHRIST IN A FRIGHTENING WORLD:
A BITTERSWEET GOSPEL
*Revelation 8.6-10.11***

A few years ago, upon their return from Russia, Cyndi's folks brought us a gift. It was a carved wooden doll. But there was something special about it. This doll came apart. Inside the doll was, what? Another doll. And so it went. Seven of them in total. Just when you think you are close to the end, you discover yet another one inside.

I don't remember the name of those dolls. But they remind me of this morning's text. Just when you think you are getting close to the end of unsealing the seven seals ...just when you think you are getting to the end of death and destruction, the last seal is broken and you discover SEVEN angels with seven trumpets about to play a very unsettling tune.

And I'll tell you the truth: this is a horrible text. I didn't want to preach on it. I put it off this week. I procrastinated. We've had some difficult images in other parts of this book. I don't think any are more horrible than what we will look at this morning. But this, too, is the Word of God. What does it have to say to us this morning? It is a long text. As I read it, I ask you to close your eyes, use your imagination, and try to answer this question: What one word describes the activities we see taking place in this troubling text?

Well, do you have an answer? What is the one word? Judgment. It is God's judgment poured out ...finally ...upon a rebellious world. Think back to the seals. The seals are, for the most part, the consequences of rebellious human beings: tyranny, warfare, resulting famine and death, religious persecution. Then we come to an interlude where God seals his followers with a mark on the forehead. In other words, he places his stamp of ownership and protection upon them. Why? For what is about to come. For what the trumpets have announced.

And what is that? God's horrible judgment. What we had a glimpse of in the sixth seal we now get in Technicolor. The first trumpet: hail and fire. A third of the earth, trees and grass destroyed. Trumpet two: a huge, burning mountain falls into the sea, polluting the waters and destroying a third of the living creatures and ships. Trumpet three: a huge asteroid falls. A third of the drinking water is now destroyed. The star even has a name: Wormwood. Trumpet four: even the galaxy falls apart. A third of the sun and moon and stars are struck.

These first four occur rather quickly. Then come the last three. The eagle calls them the three "Woes." Five may be the most horrible scene in Revelation, don't you agree? A star falls from heaven. I take that to be Satan. He is given keys to the Abyss...a gigantic furnace. Out of this pit are loosed demonic locusts with the sting of scorpions. They are covered with armor, have hair like a woman's, teeth like a lion, stingers in their tails. These locusts torture people for five months. Men want to die but cannot.

It is a horrific image. Then comes the sixth trumpet. A huge army arises from the east....two hundred million in number. Both horse and rider wear bright red, blue and yellow armor. The horses have heads of lions. They breathe fire, smoke and sulfur. And the fumes and fire from these demonic horses kill a third of humankind.

Horrible, isn't it? Would you preach this stuff? Would you be tempted to skip over it like I was? Yet here it is. In the book that promises blessing to those who listen to it. You listened this morning. Are you blessed? Last week someone shared with me that they had trouble connecting with Revelation. That it didn't really seem to apply to their lives. Just exactly how do these crazy and frightening images apply to our lives?

For one thing, they remind us of the **reality** of judgment. Let me say it as clearly as I can. There is not a soul in this room who will not face the judgment of God. Every human being that has ever lived will be judged for what they have known and what they have done with what they have known. And in the end, the entire cosmos will be a part of that judgment.

This is not the first time in the Biblical material that we have words like these. It is not even the first time in the New

Testament. I mentioned Matthew 24 last Sunday. Did any of you go home and read it? I received a letter from one man strongly disagreeing with what I said about the church going through the Great Tribulation. He asked me to show him chapter and verse. I repeat myself. Read Matthew 24.

Jesus speaks clearly and regularly that a time of judgment will come. In fact, Jesus says this in John 9: "For judgment I have come into the world." Wow. That's not we think of when we come up with reasons for Jesus coming into the world. We would say that Jesus came to love the world. Jesus came to teach the world. Jesus came to save the world. But in the same book that declares "God so loved the world that he sent his only Son that whoever believes in him would not perish but would have everlasting life," ...in the same book we have Jesus saying, "For judgment I have come into this world."

Here's what I think he means. Judgment is coming. It is going to happen. In fact, the Father has given judgment into his hand. And because judgment will come...some day ...I have come now. I have come to do all I can to save the world from the judgment that is sure to come. Put another way, he might have said, "**Because** judgment is coming, I have come into the world."

This isn't stuff we want to hear. We don't like the idea of judgment. We want to hear forgiveness, mercy, grace. But without the reality of judgment, there is no need for any of the rest. If God is not going to one day judge and punish those who have rebelled against him, what's the point of forgiveness? Who cares? If God is not going to one day judge, who needs mercy? If God is not going to one day judge, who needs his grace? It is precisely because he will judge and that his final judgment will be just and awful, that we need the rest of what we love so much about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Like I said, this isn't the first time we've heard about God's judgment. It is just that we have never heard it described more graphically. It shocks. It disturbs. Which is exactly what John intends. If there really will be judgment, then John wants us to take it seriously. Are you? Do you? Let me say it again. Judgment is a reality. A certainty. One day, we will be called to accounts for our lives. Are you ready for that day?

Notice, also, the **restraint** of God's judgment. You might say, It doesn't sound very restrained to me. But what are the clues that suggest, in fact, that God is holding back? The fraction, one-third. Did you hear it? Again and again, it is one-third of everything that is destroyed. One-third of trees, grass, waters, stars, human beings...all destroyed. Our first response is to say, this is an unspeakable horror. And so it is. But it could have been worse. It could have been two-thirds. It could have been all. In fact, when we come to the Seven Bowls, it will be all. God's judgment will be total and complete.

Why "only" one-third here? Why does God still hold back his judgment? Simple. He still waits for the world to repent. He still waits for his rebellious creation to come to its senses, change its mind and follow him. II Peter 3:9 has a wonderful promise: "God is patient with you, not wanting **anyone** to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." Why does God exercise restraint? Why does God hold back from utter destruction of evil in the world? Because he STILL wishes that others might turn to him, receive his stamp of ownership and protection, become his children.

And is that how it happens? Do they repent? Listen to this incredible text in verse 20: "The 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. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts." This text speaks of the **reality** of judgment, God's **restraint**. And now, we discover the earth-dwellers' **rejection** of God and his forgiveness.

You would think that people, having experienced these horrible plagues, would be driven to their knees and finally, repent and turn to God. The horrible truth is, they do not. The clear implication is, this was another chance. God was still giving them another chance. Yet they squander it away.

The horrible truth is, that is human nature. Sometimes God uses the great pain in our lives to cry out to us, to break through our deafness and rejection of him in the past. And sometimes, it works. Sometimes cataclysm gets our attention and turns us around before it is too late. But often, the human heart is so hard, so stubborn, that even with God's righteous judgment staring us

in the face, we still prefer to cling to our sinful ways than acknowledge him.

There is one more part to this text I want you to notice. Our **response**. Do you notice what happens to John near the end of the reading? The angel gives him the little scroll and tells him to eat it. It tastes sweet in his mouth but bitter to his stomach. Why does the angel do this? What is the point? Because, John is about to turn from being observer to proclaimer. In the very next verse, the angel says, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings." Why "again?" Because THEY DID NOT GET IT THE FIRST TIME! That's the whole point. Even after the horrible events of chapter 8 and 9, they still do not repent.

John has to eat the scroll because, before we can be proclaimers of the gospel, we must internalize it. The gospel must be real to us. Our words must proceed from our very hearts. And the scroll...the gospel that John is about to preach ...is bittersweet. The gospel always has been bittersweet. It is sweet because we come to know Jesus. A Jesus who came to earth, lived among us, taught us to love, died on the cross for us and rose again. That is a sweet word. Most people enjoy hearing that part of the story.

But it is also bitter. Why bitter? Because, there was a REASON Jesus had to die. He didn't die as an example for us. He didn't die as a helpless preacher whose mouth got the better of him. Jesus died to deal with the holy judgment of God upon a rebellious and sinful earth. Jesus died because someone had to pay the consequences of our sin. It could be us, but the result would be eternal separation from God, what the Bible calls hell. I think we caught a glimpse of what hell can be like in today's text. Or, Jesus could die in our place, pay the price and receive God's judgment upon himself so that we would not have to. That is what he did.

Are you ready to face the judgment of God? Last Friday, my mom was assisting in the pre-school. She called me in and told me that Cooper wasn't doing well. When I went in, he was in tears. He loves pre-school so he was obviously sick. I took him into my office. I had to. Cyndi and Rachel are in Salt Lake City with her folks. Cooper sat on my lap as I made a conference call. He fell asleep. I laid him down on the carpet to sleep and, because it was chilly, went to the closet to find something with

which to cover him. The only thing I found was one of my preaching robes. I spread that big black robe over the top of my boy. It swallowed him up. You could hardly see his head poking out from beneath it.

Then I just sat and looked at my little, sick, wonderful boy. And it struck me. When we receive the gift of Jesus' salvation that is exactly what happens. He wraps us in his beautiful robe of righteousness. We can't even be seen inside of that thing. In our tiny, sick state, we are hidden inside the righteousness of Christ. And when the Father looks upon us, he sees not our sin-sick state, but the righteousness of his beloved Son. And we are spared his judgment.

The judgment of God will one day come. Upon this earth. And upon each and every soul. You do not want to face that judgment alone. You cannot. You dare not. And if the horrors of this morning's text cause you to think once again about where you stand with God, they have accomplished exactly what John hoped they would.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR
A BITTERSWEET GOSPEL
Revelation 8.6-10.11

2/20/00

Pastor Mark Toone

- Pastor Mark has dealt with some controversial issues regarding the end times---issues such as the nature of the 144,000 mentioned in chapter 7 and the opinion that the Church will go through the tribulation. Are these issues you have ever dealt with? What have you believed about them? Why do you suppose people find contrasting theories on this subject so disturbing?
- Please read 8:3-5. When was the last time we talked about an altar in Revelation? (Hint...6.9-11). It seems that the angels are mixing the prayers of the saints with fire and throwing them back upon the earth. Could it be that the prayers for vengeance actually are used by God to accomplish the judgment that will follow? What does that tell you about prayer? How can prayer change things if God really does "have a plan?" How can we have it both ways?
- What is your response when you read chapter 9? How can judgment be part of the "good news"...the gospel? What is "good" about judgment? Think about your role as parents.
- Do you find it remarkable that the people still do not repent? (v. 20ff.) Why do we have a hard time changing our minds and hearts? Have you found it so in your own life?
- In what way is the gospel "bittersweet?" What is bitter about it? What is "sweet?" Pray for each other.