

6. What happens when Grace is rejected

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[0 : 00] Now let's pray. God our Father, we pray that as we draw near to you, that you will most graciously draw near to us, that you will open your word to our hearts and minds, that you will open our hearts and minds to your word.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen. And if we would have our Bibles open at Revelation 8 and 9, that would be a big help.

A number of years ago, when our children were at the stage where wide-eyed youthful innocence was passing into truculent adolescence, you know, all parents will know that stage, where the enthusiasm of childhood begins to be overlaid with a certain cynicism.

We took them to the Eureka Museum in Halifax, down in Yorkshire. And the first few rooms we went through were treated with a certain contempt. You know, why are we here?

We are far too old for this. Till we came to the room called Me and My Body, and they were absolutely hooked as they saw all those graphic and wonderful working models of the insides of the human body.

[1 : 29] They loved it. All that blood, all that gore. I felt terribly sick as I realised what was actually happening inside the human body.

You see what I'm getting at, though? You look at the outside and you have little idea, unless, of course, you're a medical specialist, of what is actually happening inside.

Inside. Whether it's good or bad, and sometimes horrific. Now, as we approach these passages, Revelation 8 and 9, what I'm going to suggest to you is that we have to look inside this passage, beyond the surface imagery, and ask ourselves, what actually is happening?

Because I'm sure as we read this, you must have been wondering two things. Number one, what on earth is all this about? And number two, what on earth does it have to do with us? I want to suggest that the answer to both, the answer to the first question is, this is all about what happens when grace is rejected.

That's my title for this evening. What happens to people who turn their back on God and his messengers? And this is a graphic illustration of what does happen.

[2 : 46] And secondly, what does it have to do with us? What it has to do with us is we must make certain that we are part of the great multitude that no one could number in chapter 7, standing before God and before the Lamb, and not those of verses 20 and 21 of chapter 9.

The rest of mankind did not repent, did not give up worshipping idols, and so on. The imagery is powerful. It's shocking. It's disturbing.

It lingers in the mind and in the imagination. And when we get to this part in Revelation, the commentators don't help us very much. Liberal commentators say that John, who of course is not the apostle in their view, but whoever wrote this has had a series of hallucinations.

Perhaps even worse, he's on drugs or had sunstroke on Patmos, and what we've got here are the outpourings of a diseased imagination. Now, of course, we'd have no difficulty, most of us, in rejecting that.

But the trouble is there's another view which is still held among many evangelicals, particularly in America, that this is a literal description of what is going to happen on earth after the saints are raptured into heaven.

[4 : 05] In chapter 4, the saints are taken away into heaven, and what happens in chapter 6 and following is judgments that unfold on earth after the rapture.

Now, as I've said already, that point of view, which is called dispensationalism, cannot possibly be sustained because it's very clear from chapter 7 that God's people are still on earth, and the point of these interludes is telling us what will happen to them when the judgments are being unleashed.

As we look at these chapters, I want to suggest two principles to guide us. First of all, and both these views I've mentioned, treat Revelation as if it were an eccentric book at the end of the Bible that had very little to do with what has happened before.

I flicked through a book some time ago which comes from that dispensationalist interpretation which more or less says that. Here we have revealed to us what is not anywhere else in the Bible.

I want to suggest that's totally wrong. What the book of Revelation is doing is it's bringing together the earlier pictures, the earlier doctrines, the earlier images and focusing them very clearly.

[5 : 26] If you were here in the first of this series, I suggested the key to understanding Revelation was first of all to see that it was an open book. In other words, a book that unfolds what has gone before.

That's what Revelation means. The book is given to reveal, not to conceal. Secondly, it's a book that tells us of the eternal gospel. This is the same gospel that Abraham believed in.

This is the gospel preached by the Lord Jesus Christ. It's not a different gospel. And thirdly, it is about the triumphant Christ. The open book, the eternal gospel, and the triumphant Christ.

And that's the key, it seems to me, to understanding what's happening here. It's a culmination of what's gone before. And the second principle, it seems to me, is understanding this is a direct challenge and appeal to people to believe in that eternal gospel by showing them what happens if they don't believe in it.

Now, with that in mind, let's try and look into the chapter and see what we can find. And there are three movements, really. First of all, the prayers of the saints in chapter 8, verses 1 to 5.

[6 : 44] In chapter 7, the scene in heaven, and then in these verses, a transition to the scene on earth. This is characteristic of the book of Revelation.

There are alternating scenes between heaven and earth right through it. And it's a dramatic interlude before the seventh seal is opened.

Now, as you would see at the end of chapter 9, only the sixth trumpet has been blown, and there's an interlude of two chapters before the seventh trumpet is blown.

So that's characteristic. It's an interlude before the seventh seal is opened. And we've got to ask, first of all, the question, why? Why is this interlude here?

There was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And that comes from Habakkuk, chapter 2. The Lord is in his holy temple.

[7 : 41] Let all be silent before him. Now, obviously, half an hour is not a literal period of time. It's a short but significant period of time when the judgments are stopped and heaven waits for something else.

What is it waiting for? It's waiting for the prayers of the saints. See what the apostle is saying. The apostle is saying when God's people on earth pray, God gives his full attention, if you like.

He turns aside from running the universe and carrying out judgments to listen to the prayers of his people. What a friend we have in Jesus. All our sins and griefs to bear.

And by the way, just a quick word here. Notice the balance of that. All our sins and griefs to bear.

Too often we are concerned he'll bear our griefs only and forget about our sins or else we simply see him as someone who forgives our sins and has no real interest in what else happens to us.

It's so balanced and so right. This is not a well-known passage but it's difficult to find a passage in scripture that more underlines the importance of prayer so dramatically.

[9 : 03] When God's people pray, the Lord, if you like, puts aside his other responsibility and listens. That's absolutely amazing. Not, of course, that prayer changes things.

That's a very, very misleading statement. Prayer does not change things. Prayer puts us in touch with the Lord of the universe who does change things. Now listen carefully to what I'm saying.

I said this in another church some months ago. I was quoted as, oh, Bob Files said that prayer doesn't matter at all. That's not what I said. I said it is not prayer which changes things.

It's God who changes things and changes people but prayer is the way in which we are in touch with him, in touch with the Lord of the universe who listens and in whose hand is our destiny.

So, why, why is there silence in heaven because God is listening to the prayers of the saints? And secondly, if you like, what? What is happening?

[10 : 04] Now, of course, there are great mysteries here and commentators differ but clearly there is angel activity going on.

That's enormously important. I've said that several times before. You can never read the book of Revelation and think that angels are irrelevant or unimportant. Another angel, verse 3, came and stood at the altar with a golden censer and he was given much incense with the prayers of all the saints.

Not probably incense and prayers so much as incense which is prayers. And the smoke is the sign of God's acceptance, the fire falling on the altar, so to speak.

The other angel, possibly Gabriel or Michael, one of the great ones in the heavenly court. Now, is this bizarre? Think about it this way.

We sang a few moments ago, Your kingdom come, O God, Your role, O Christ, begin. Break with Your iron rod the tyrannies of sin. You see, the prayers of the church throughout the centuries, Your kingdom come.

[11:13] This is dramatized here. When God's people pray for the coming of His kingdom, and in a sense, of course, that includes everything we pray for, doesn't it? Because praying of the coming of the kingdom of God is praying that God's rule will prevail on earth.

So the prayers of the saints are part of God's way of bringing about His kingdom. Who are the saints, by the way?

Not an elite group who are especially good at praying. They are all of God's people. As they pray, the angel, now some argue that the angel is actually the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who presents our prayers in heaven.

I don't think that's true because it would be an odd way to refer to Him. But of course, obviously, the intercession of the Lord Himself in heaven. The whole of the heavenly court, if you like, waits, and the prayers of God's people are presented.

And then, after that interlude, come the seven angels with the seven trumpets. Now the trumpets, once again, an Old Testament image when God's people moved as they went through the desert, reading the book of Numbers, the trumpet was blown.

[12:29] A call to action, a call to war. And in 1 Thessalonians, Paul tells us that the coming of the Lord will be accompanied with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God.

So that's the first thing then, the prayers of the saints, not an extra factor, but a vital part of God carrying out the government of the universe.

that goes into the second movement which begins with the first angel blowing his trumpet. Now, the first, second, third, and fourth angels, they're described in verses 6 to 12.

And I'm going to call this the curse on creation. We have the prayers of the saints and we have here the curse on creation. That's what I meant when I said this is not an eccentric book at the end of the Bible because this passage is drawing very heavily on two Old Testament passages.

First of all, Genesis 3. Haven't we often noticed how the end of the Bible echoes the beginning? How the words of Genesis are coming to their final fulfillment in this last book.

[13:42] Remember Genesis 3. After the sin of Adam and Eve, the earth will be cursed because of you. And this is showing us that this is what's happening.

The direct judgment of God. And the other passage that's deliberately echoed here and in the later trumpet is the plagues of Egypt. Reminding us that it is the same God and the same judgment.

I've often said there is not an Old Testament God and a New Testament God. The fact that this imagery is used, the fact that the plagues of Egypt, are being echoed, reminds us of that.

You see the hail, the hail and fire, verse 7, the first trumpet, this echoes the plague of hail, the seventh plague of Egypt.

If you read that passage in Exodus chapter 9 and 10, you'll discover this is the turning point of the story where Pharaoh finally hardens his heart.

[14:45] Pharaoh keeps on hardening his heart, but this is the turning point. And that, of course, is anticipating verses 20 and 21 of chapter 9. They did not repent. Plague of hail.

And then, of course, we have the second angel, great mountain burning with fire. Once again, we don't want to take this literally.

I mean, some commentators say it's probably excessive volcanic activity. Well, that's fair enough. Well, I mean, that's part of the curse on nature. The volcanoes which destroy so much of the earth. The blazing mountain in the blazing great star in verse 10 from the meteorite and so on. All that's happening here is the judgment of God on the fallen world order.

Now, we've seen this before. The curse is something which humanity brought on itself by its sin. But having done that, then God underwrites that judgment.

[15:46] As it says in Romans 1, God gave them over to a reprobate mind. Three times the terrible divine hands of God gave them over.

And then the fourth angel blew his trump, a third of the sun and so on. Probably probably a symbol of the powers on earth, the great nations, the warring nations and so on.

Symbol of the day of the Lord, the darkness, like the plague in Egypt. Well, fair enough. What's all that about? Even if we say all this, this comes from the plagues of Egypt, I want to say two things. First of all, it tells us that the curse on creation is real. There is no place for nature worship or praising the creature more than the creator.

Once again, which Paul singles out in Romans 1 as a particular sin. Sin has defaced and cursed the universe.

[16:56] So there can be no such thing as nature worship. There is a school of thinking sometimes called original goodness, which takes all the good aspects of nature, the moonlight nights, woodland meadows, all these things which are so beautiful and ignores totally sin and fallenness.

Now, I want to say a word about this. Sin and fallenness are not identical. They are clearly related. Think about all these things happening, these disasters, these floods, these earthquakes, these tsunamis, all the kind of the earthquakes, all these things which when we hear about we are rightly concerned, we rightly pray for the victims.

Now, the victims of these are victims of the curse on creation of fallenness. Not because these people are more wicked than other people who are not swept up by the floods and not destroyed in the earthquakes.

Remember Jesus' words in Luke 13 about these kind of disasters, except you repent. You will all perish. We are all part of a fallen world order.

And because of that we must never idolize and especially must never worship nature. Creation is cursed. As we'll see when we come to the end of the book, creation is to be gloriously, wonderfully transformed and redeemed.

[18:25] But it is cursed. The second thing about this is mercy is mixed with judgment. Notice the number of times, over and over again, a third of the earth was burned up.

Verse 7, verse 9, a third of the living creatures died. A third of the waters became wormwood. Verse 11, really a terrifying mirror image of Exodus 17 where Moses threw a tree into bitter waters and it turned sweet.

Here is the exact opposite happening and then a third of the day and likewise a third of the night in verse 12. And this points forward to the day when the fallen world will be completely freed from the curse.

That of course is Romans 8. The whole creation is groaning in the pains of childbirth. But one day that creation will be gloriously renewed.

And it's a reminder that this is not the final judgment. There are judgments in history and that's what this is about. The judgment on history we'll come to in chapter 20 when the great from before the one seated on the great white throne heaven and earth flee away.

[19:40] Peter also talks about this, the elements melting the earth and everything in it burned up. And we'll look at that passage when we come to it. So there is mercy mixed with judgment.

judgment. But notice the warning in verse 13. The eagle probably chosen for its swiftness and power because the focus is now to turn from the created order to the human beings in that created order.

We have the prayers of the saints and their influence on the throne of God. We've had the curse on creation and the judgment of God which show his anger against the fallenness and sinfulness and yet his mercy mingled with that.

And I want to suggest in chapter 9 and in the fifth and sixth trumpets we have the unmasking of the devil himself. That's what's happening here it seems to me.

There is another power at work and that power is the devil himself. As he attacks those who dwell on the earth. Now notice the word woe in verse 13.

[20:57] Woe is the opposite of blessing. Blessed are those. That doesn't mean they're necessarily happy at any given time. It means they are chosen for a destiny of salvation.

Woe means a destiny of judgment. That's what's being said here. These verses seem to me are about how Satan and his hordes attack the ungodly.

Coming back to the illustration I used at the beginning. Satan glamorizes himself. Remember Paul says Satan transforms himself into an angel of light. That's the normal way Satan works in our culture is it not?

Transforms himself into an angel of light. One of the ways he does it, we'll see this particularly come to chapter 13 is by utterly charming people preaching wrong doctrine and heresy.

And of course if the devil can try and make the gospel be preached by cranks and weirdos then to use a theological phrase that's a double whammy isn't it?

[21 : 58] Because you're the kind of thing that said so and so such a nice man he's so gentle he can't possibly be wrong. That is the devil as an angel of light.

Here the devil is totally revealed for who and what he is. We're going to see this even more in chapters 12 and 13. Satan and his hordes attack the ungodly.

Notice the important verse 4. Only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. Remember we saw that back in chapter 7.

These are the people who have the spirit of God in them. Now of course they're attacked by the devil but they are also protected by the Lord put on the whole armour of God to be able to stand against the devices of the devil.

And those are once again the limitations. They have power for five months. Verse 5 they're allowed to torment them for five months but not to kill.

[23 : 06] Once again five months is probably the life cycle of the locust. It's a symbolic number. Satan's power is not unlimited.

Remember back in the book of Job God says to Satan he's in your hand but spare his life. It's the same kind of ideas here. So in the fifth trumpet we have Satan's involvement it seems to me in the world.

Verses 1 to 11. And here once again drawing from the Old Testament the plague of locusts which is both in Exodus and also in Joel as a precursor of the day of the Lord.

A star fallen from heaven to earth is a picture of Satan himself. Other passages in scripture use this kind of figure of Satan.

We read in Isaiah 14 of day star son of the dawn thrown down from heaven. Jesus says I saw Satan as lightning fall from heaven and in chapter 12 we're going to find him thrown out of heaven.

[24 : 15] He is associated with the abyss, the bottomless pit, the abode of evil, the deep. In chapter 11 verse 7 we read of the beast that rises from the abyss.

Excuse me. This is thirsty stuff. And the demons here are seen as locusts.

But just as the Israelites were protected from the plagues of Egypt, so God's people are protected against Satan and his demons. Now, what we must not do is try and draw these locusts.

The important thing is the cumulative effect of this. The appearance is grotesque and it's meant to be grotesque. And it's meant to be grotesque to show us what Satan is actually like.

The strength, the swiftness, chariots and horses rushing into battle. There's ten tails and things like scorpions. But verse 11 makes very plain what they are.

[25 : 25] They have as king over them, the angel of the bottomless pit. The angel of the bottomless pit is the god of this world, the devil himself. Hebrew Abaddon, in the book of Job that's used as a place of darkness, of pain and of evil, and the Greek equivalent of Apollyon.

See, ultimately there is nothing glamorous about Satan. One of Satan's devices, I say, is to glamorize evil, to glamorize sin. This passage is saying, no, look under the surface.

This is what it is like. It's full of evil, full of dreadful things. The prince of this world, the prince of the power of the air, as Satan is called.

So this shows Satan's involvement in the world. It seems to me that it's a wake-up cry, basically saying, if you are living without the seal of God on your forehead.

This is the kind of thing to expect, the attack of Satan. And notice verse 12, the first was passed, behold, two woes are still to come.

[26 : 41] J.B. Phillips, vividly in his translation says, the first disaster is now past, but I see two more approaching. And then finally, the sixth trumpet, Satan's attacks on humanity release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.

The number was twice 10,000 times 10,000. Paul Lindsay in 1970 in his book *The Late Great Planet Earth* said that's the number of forces in the Chinese army.

I don't think that can be a true interpretation of this. That's simply trying to read all kinds of political and all kinds of sociological ideas into this.

The point is Satan and his angels have enormous power. The image of invading cavalry and the four angels suggest worldwide destruction.

Now, why are they at the Euphrates? The Euphrates was the boundary between Israel and its main enemies. This is the waters of Babylon. Going back further still, the Euphrates is one of the rivers that flows from Eden.

[27 : 59] And Abraham was told that his descendants would have the land between the river of Egypt and the river Euphrates, which happened briefly and temporarily under David and Solomon.

So you see here we have the battle between good and evil, the battle between God's people and the forces of destruction. It is, of course, a picture of militarism, a picture of unbridled militarism and the great havoc it brings on the earth.

That, of course, itself is simply a reflection of the demonic. Look at verse 19. Their tails are like serpents with heads. That tells us all we need to know, doesn't it?

They are agents of the serpent himself. Do you know what I mean when I say bringing together the big story of the Bible? The battle joined in Genesis chapter 3.

The descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. The serpent is raging and active. And what's the point of verses 20 to 21?

[29 : 08] The point surely is that the reason for the preaching of judgment, the reason for these passages is to do this, to turn people to repentance.

repentance. When judgment is being preached, that is a sign that God is still merciful, that the door is still open, that the offer of salvation is still there.

But they did not repent of the works of their hands. And you see, I think verses 20 and 21 really are telling us what these previous verses are about. Standing back from these verses and their powerful and grotesque imagery, what's really happening here?

What's really happening is that people are worshipping the creature rather than the creator. Idolatry and the evils which fly from it. Now just one thing as we finish.

It's not the major thrust of this chapter. But remember this is part of a whole sequence and series of judgments. And who is the judge?

[30 : 14] The judge is the lamb himself. Christ, the first word, and the last word, who is unmasking the devil to us, telling us if we are not Christian, this is the kind of world we are choosing rather than the world of chapter seven, the world of being sealed with the lamb and standing before his throne.

It's reminding us of the utter supremacy of grace. How else can we defeat the devil? we can only defeat him in the realm of prayer, can we not?

That's the only place we can reach and touch him. And if we are not in that realm, if we are not sealed by the spirit of God, then we are in real danger, deadly, terrible danger of these awful judgments of chapter nine.

And that seems to be the message of these chapters. What happens when grace is rejected? And my prayer is that none of us in this church this evening will ever reject grace.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord, these are powerful and terrifying chapters.

[31 : 35] They are part of your message to us. They are part of what we need to hear. so help us to throw ourselves totally on your grace and rely totally on your great salvation.

Be among those sealed by the lamb who will stand before the throne crying salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the lamb. Amen.