

4. Most merciful Saviour, Judge Eternal

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[0 : 00] Now, if we'd have our Bibles open at page 103.1, we'll have a moment of prayer together. God our Father, as you opened heaven to your servant John, and showed him wonderful things, showed him what was and is and is to come, that you will open to us this passage of Scripture, and lead us to that same Christ, the Lamb upon the throne, the first word and the last word, the Alpha and the Omega. We ask that in his name. Amen.

When I was a boy, it was probably true that the most often quoted and the best known Biblical text was John 3.16, and that was good, that great verse that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believed in him should not perish but have eternal life.

I rather suspect that today in Christian circles that's been overtaken by Matthew 7, verse 1, which reads, Judge not, or you will be judged.

And that's a text often used to beat people who have a particular view, people who want to stick to the Scriptures. Oh, you mustn't judge. It's not for us to judge.

It's not for us to say that anything is right and anything is wrong. That's arrogant. And yet, that same passage goes on to say, Don't cast perils before pigs.

[1 : 38] Now, if you don't know who the pigs are, in other words, if you don't discriminate who the pigs are, then how are you going to know before whom we are not to cast these perils? You're going to be like at the end of Animal Farm.

He looked from the pigs to the humans and from the humans to the pigs, and they couldn't see any difference. Now, Matthew 7, verse 1, is essentially speaking of judgment to come, the kind of judgment that only God can make of a person's life, indeed, of the whole of human history.

And judgment is going to be our main theme tonight, and indeed it's going to be the main theme in this whole section, from chapter 6 to 16. That's why I've chosen as my title tonight the phrase from the Anglican prayer book, Most Merciful Saviour, Judge Eternal.

Notice what that says. It doesn't say Most Merciful Saviour, who also happens to be the judge. It doesn't say Most Merciful Saviour, but you ought to know he is the judge as well.

These two statements are absolutely parallel. It is the Saviour who is the judge. It is the judge who is the Saviour. It is the Lamb who died, the Lamb on the throne, who is the judge.

[2 : 54] The one who one day will judge the world in righteousness. Now this long section, chapters 6 to 16, unfolds a series of three sevenfold judgments coming upon the earth.

There is the judgment of the seals, here and on to chapter 8. There is the judgment of the trumpets, and then there's the judgment of the bulls.

Now seven, as I've suggested already, in apocalyptic writing, means a comprehensive sweep. This is the whole of human history, if you like. And three is the number of the Trinity.

This is God, the Saviour, and the Judge, carrying out these judgments. Now these judgments cannot be in chronological sequence for a very simple reason.

Among these judgments, there are a number of interludes, one of which we'll look at next Sunday evening, the sealing of the people of God during the judgments.

[3 : 59] In other words, while these judgments are happening, God's people are still on earth. There is the view that David Macaulay referred to this morning, that the rapture has taken place in chapter 4, where John is told to come up here, and I will show you what must take place.

And the church is now raptured, and in heaven, represented by John, and the events, therefore, in chapters 6 to 16, unfold on the earth, the great tribulation, after the rapture, and before the coming of Christ in glory.

You may have heard of that view. It's still pretty common. It's very common in America. Indeed, it's a point of orthodoxy in some American churches and seminaries. This is the way to look at it.

But I don't think that can be true. I want to suggest, what we're looking at is seven parallel series of judgments that happen throughout the whole of the last days.

And by the last days, I don't mean I've been given some inside information telling us exactly when the Lord will return. We are in the last days. But we've been in the last days since the incarnation, since the first coming of Christ.

[5 : 13] The last days is the period between his first and his second coming, which doesn't take place in the book of Revelation until chapter 19, when the rider on the white horse, not the same as this rider on the white horse, as we'll see in a moment, rise out of heaven with the armies of heaven, the angels and the saints accompanying him.

So, we have three parallel sequences with interludes, but it's not just a repetition. These sequences become increasingly intense as they go on.

It's a spiral effect. They don't simply repeat each other. And one other thing else I want to say just by way of introduction. This may seem strange and bizarre.

When you go home, read one of these three chapters, Matthew 24, or Mark 13, or Luke 21, or read them all if you like.

This is the so-called Olivet Discourse, which the Lord Jesus Christ gave to his disciples on the Mount of Olives just before his death. And the sequence of events he outlines here is developed in these chapters 6 and the following.

[6 : 32] In other words, what the Lord Jesus Christ has already said is now being developed by the Apostle here. We are talking about the last days, the period between the comings.

So, if somebody says to you, we are living in the last days, then say, good for you. We know we are living in the last days, and we have a message for the last days. The message is the whole Bible.

And I said to you a week or two ago, that in many ways, Revelation sums up the whole Bible. I described it as an eternal gospel, an open book, and an eternal gospel.

So, with that in mind, let's look at this chapter, which clearly falls into three parts. Verses 1 to 4, sorry, verses 1 to 8, the first four seals, it's the first part.

Then verses 9 to 11, the fifth seal, and verse 6, sorry, the sixth seal, verses 12 to 17. Let me repeat that.

[7 : 34] I've never been any good with numbers. I'm sure I've got it all mixed up. So, let me repeat it with some clarity. Verses 1 to 8 are the first four seals. Verses 9 to 11, the fifth seal, and verses 12 to 17, the sixth seal.

So, let's look at these sections then. In the first section, verses 1 to 8, I'm going to call this judgment is not arbitrary. Judgment is not simply indiscriminating and unfair.

It's not arbitrary. Now, these verses, the four horsemen of the apocalypse, have given rise to many, many paintings, particularly Albrecht Dürer in 1511, a grim picture of these horsemen riding out, trampling people underfoot.

So, just a word or two about these four horsemen. And then, what I want to look at is what lies behind this. We have, first of all, the rider on the white horse.

Now, the rider on the white horse is clearly not Christ himself. At the end, at the end, in chapter 19, Christ rides out of heaven on a white horse, but there follow him the armies of heaven, not desolation and plague and death and destruction.

[8 : 50] The only comparison between these two riders is that they are both on white horses. This is probably military conquest in general. The white horse and its rider had a bow and a crown was given to him and he came out conquering and to conquer.

The various warlords who throughout history have inflicted desolation and death on the earth. The second horse, the bright red horse, is probably specifically slaughter and bloodshed, which is the inevitable accompaniment of the militarism.

Some have said, possibly especially civil war, verse 4, that men should slay one another. That's possibly going a little bit too far, but there is truth in it. The third one is probably the black horse is famine and plague, presumably.

I look, verse 5, behold, a black horse, the rider, a pair of scales in his hand. Famine, poverty. Now, look what it says here.

I heard a voice at verse 6, a quart of wheat for a denarius. A denarius was a whole day's wages for an ordinary worker.

[10 : 10] So you see what's happening. Ordinary commodities, the price is being dreadfully inflated, but notice, do not harm the oil and the wine. Make sure the rich are untouched by this.

And we know very, very well throughout history that it's always the poor and the underprivileged who suffer most when there is war, when there is famine, when there is plague.

The fourth rider is death. Well, it's actually, I was going to say it looks like death warmed up, which is exactly what it is. Its rider's name was death and Hades followed him.

Death and Hades really sweep up, if you like, the consequences of the activities of the other horsemen. Now, this is no doubt the world as we know it.

Many commentators are quite happy to leave it at that and say this is what happens in history. We need to look at it more closely. I said I wanted to call this judgment is not arbitrary.

[11 : 09] We need to notice one or two things. First of all, this is under the control of the Lamb. Verse 1, I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals.

It's basically established right at the beginning he is the judge. Even though angels in later sequences blow the trumpets and empty the bowls, it's established right at the beginning it is the Lamb, the Lamb who died, the Lamb in the midst of the throne who carries out these judgments.

Notice the words. Verse 2, a crown was given to him. Now, most dictators don't imagine that a crown is given to them. Verse 4, it was permitted.

Verse 8, given authority. Now, everything serves the purpose of God. Now, how do you be careful how we talk about this? The world is fallen and the world is under a curse.

Now, fallenness and curse and suffering obviously are dreadful things and obviously as human beings we do everything we can to help when there are disasters.

[12 : 24] I want to put it this way though. The reason these things happen is because we are part of a fallen world order. Let me give you an example.

A baby born in Uganda with the AIDS virus is clearly not guilty of any specific sin that has caused that child to be born that way.

She is suffering because she is part of a fallen and broken world. In a world where there is no fallenness and brokenness there would be no AIDS, there would be no cancer, there would be no earthquakes and tsunamis and indeed that is what John is working up to at the end of the book.

So the fallen creation is part of the part of the let me put it this way my tongue is running away with my tongue is running away with me.

The creation is fallen and therefore dreadful things happen. But they only happen under the control of the Lamb and this is the Lamb who gave himself the Lamb who died the Lamb who descended into the male storm of suffering the Lamb who gave himself the Lamb who calls people to himself.

[13 : 42] So that's the first thing. The judgments are under permission indeed at the behest of the Lamb. Second thing is judgment is both something that is God given and something that people choose for themselves.

See we choose sin. we willingly sin. But there comes a point when God underwrites this. Remember these terrible words in Romans chapter 1 three times.

In Romans chapter 1 Paul talks about human sin, human rebellion and three times the terrible divine hands off. God gave them over. God gave them over.

God gave them over. It's like back in the flood story. At the beginning of Genesis God says the whole earth is corrupt so I will destroy it.

Now in Hebrew these are both parts of the same verb. You can almost translate it God says the earth has self destructed so I will destroy it. You see judgment is not arbitrary.

[14 : 48] I've been reading a book of Jeremiah recently and in that book Jeremiah warns King Zedekiah that if he does not surrender to the Babylonians he will be destroyed and the city will be destroyed right up to the very very last moment is the chance to repent.

And indeed as we'll see at the end of chapter 9 the judgment of the trumpets chapter 9 verse 20 the rest of mankind did not repent of the works of their hands verse 21 nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

So judgment is both God given and also something that people choose. And the third thing is this and I think this is so important it's a very popular idea it's particularly popular among liberals that judgment is not actually anything personal at all.

It's simply something that happens because the world is the way it is. If you touch a red hot wire you will be burnt and that's that. If you run your car a hundred miles into a wall you'll probably be killed and that's that.

Now that sounds actually as if it were a kinder view but think about it for a minute. Indeed think about how C.S.

[16 : 16] Lewis dealt with that when he confronted it way back in the 1930s and 40s. Lewis pointed out if you talk about the anger of God as a live wire it's still a metaphor it's still a picture just as much as the metaphor of a king sitting on a throne angrily judging those who have rebelled.

And Lewis says this what do you gain by substituting a metaphor of live wire for a metaphor of outraged majesty.

for outraged majesty can forgive a live wire cannot. So you see although this view sounds gentler although it sounds more tolerant and convenient contemporary thinking it actually is a view of absolute despair.

We are shut up in a universe of cause and effect which we can do nothing about. You see the lamb who died is the judge and since the lamb who died is the judge there is always a possibility of mercy.

Today your mercy calls me to wash away my sin however great my trespass however I have been however long for mercy I may have turned away.

[17 : 37] A live wire cannot forgive outraged majesty can. The lamb who died is the judge. What we have here are the judgments in history throughout history should foreshadow the judgment on history the judgment of the great white throne.

So these right from the beginning of time go back to Genesis 10 warlords like Nimrod who bestrode the earth like Colossus thought they were in control.

They're not. They're under the control of the lamb. That's the first thing. Judgment is not arbitrary. Second thing in the fifth seal in verses 9 to 11 suffering is not pointless.

Judgment is not arbitrary. Suffering is not pointless. You see the focus changes now to heaven and where one of the consequences of course of verses of the first four seals is martyrdom.

Now martyrdom and suffering for the cause of Christ can seem senseless. In fact don't we often use words like this? When some disaster happens we use the word senseless.

[18 : 53] And of course in human terms it is senseless. But the point is we're being shown behind the curtain this is not senseless. And when the martyrs die when people suffer for the testimony the word of God and the witness they have borne John sees it from the perspective of heaven.

what's happening in heaven? It's a sacrifice in the heavenly temple. Now not a sacrifice for their own sins he's been forgiven by the one once for all perfect sacrifice rather like Paul in 2nd Timothy chapter 4 talking about his life poured out as a drink offering as a sacrifice.

And as in Romans 12 verse 1 the sacrifice of redeemed life present your bodies as living sacrifices. So as the focus changes to heaven we see that suffering for the sake of Christ is not pointless.

Now some commentators have complained about this prayer how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth. They've said it doesn't fit with Father forgive them they know not what they do or with Stephen's dying prayer Lord do not lay this sin to their charge.

What's happening here this is not prayer for personal vindication this is prayer for the coming of the kingdom. The coming of the kingdom can only happen when God's enemies are destroyed and there of course are two ways of God's enemies being destroyed the good way which is for them to lay down their arms and surrender to Christ and become his followers or if that's turned aside then judgment on the last day.

[20 : 38] Rather like the parable sometimes called the unjust judge in Luke chapter 18. Remember the widow who continually pestered the unjust judge.

Remember there it's a civil case. When we think of the word unjust judge we tend to think of miscarriages of justice. Somebody who bullies innocent people into court and then gives them a terrible sentence.

The difficulty for the widow was not being in court. The difficulty was trying to get in. She knew she had a case and that the judge would listen to it. So you see this is the same kind of thing.

Lord are your purposes actually going to be fulfilled? Think about this next time you pray your kingdom come your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

That's another way really of saying verse 10 how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth because the one implies the other. And notice they are given white robes which is not of course their own righteousness but the righteousness of Christ and the white robes here stand for their public acknowledgement.

[21 : 51] Lord I will acknowledge them before my father. And it's got a limit see they were each given a white robe to rest a little longer until the number of their fellow servants their brothers should be complete nor to be killed as they themselves had been.

So you see there is a limit. God's patience is great but it won't last forever. So suffering is not pointless.

And thirdly the sixth seal rebellion will not be endless verses 15 to 17. In other words the rebellion against God will not last forever.

Now what we have throughout this section is a number of anticipations. This is not clearly the final judgment because the seventh seal hasn't yet happened but is an anticipation of the final judgment.

A number of anticipations of the end. In the Old Testament an earthquake is often seen as a sign of the day of the Lord. And also if you read your Old Testament you'll find that many events such as the Exodus and the exile are apocalyptic events.

[23 : 09] In other words they foreshadow what is going to come. And so it is here. There's a great earthquake. The sun became black as sackcloth and the full moon became like blood and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.

What are you going to make of this? I said a few weeks ago that Revelation is not a book that you want to draw from. In other words it's not.

We've got to take the language in its power, in its poignancy. I think the first thing it's saying is that there will be a cosmic shaking.

The coming of God affects the whole of nature. And we'll see this later on as well. The gospel is not just about individual salvation.

It is about that and it's wonderful. It's wonderful that men and women, sinners, can be forgiven and stand in the presence of the Lamb rejoicing for all eternity.

[24 : 19] But it's not just about that. It's about the restoration of the whole cosmos. It's about the undoing of the curse of Eden. You'll notice in the New Testament.

When we are talking about the great saving events, there are cosmic effects. Remember the star of Bethlehem when the baby was born.

Now I know commentators want to tell us it was Halley's Comet or a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn or something like that. The point is surely that God was blazing across the sky.

Something is happening. And of course Herod and the holy establishment didn't understand it, but the wise men, certainly wise men in the biblical sense, their hearts were open and as the star blazed in the sky, this was the sign that something was happening.

Think again at the end, the darkness at the cross. Darkness came over all the land from the third hour to the sixth hour. And think about in Matthew's gospel, the opening of the graves and so on.

[25 : 30] When God is on the move, creation is moved. Terror creeps through all creation when it knows that you are here. When the creator invades his creation.

Now I know of course the first time he came incognito. The young prince of glory landed incognito behind the enemy lines and met the serpent dragon.

We read about in chapter 12 of Revelation and gave him a deadly blow. Even then though there are signs in heaven. And read these chapters in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Jesus uses exactly the same words, the stars of heaven will fall and so on. This creation which he has made is going to be moved as he judges and as he prepares it for the new creation.

And that's the first thing. It's not just individual salvation, not just individual judgment, it is the whole universe is being affected. And secondly, the whole of humanity is going to be affected.

[26 : 37] Verse 15, the kings of the earth and the great ones and the general and the rich and the powerful. That's fine. And everyone can't get much more comprehensive than that.

Hide themselves, calling to the mountains and rocks, fall on us, hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb. The whole of humanity looks on in terror as the Lamb opens the seal as the judgment begins.

Where did we read something like that before? Once again, go back to the beginning of our Bibles. Where is the first attempt to hide from God? Adam and Eve hid themselves in the trees of the garden because they could not face God.

As it was at the beginning, so it will be at the end. As C.S. Lewis said, one day that face which will be the terror of the delight, or the delight of the whole universe, will be turned on each of us.

And the chapter ends with a question, who can stand? I'm not going to go on to try and answer that question because that's the subject of chapter 7 which we'll look at next week.

[27 : 58] But you see how this chapter is developing. What's being set out here is judgment is not senseless and arbitrary. Now just one other point about that.

The fact that as each of the riders, the grim riders come out, one of the living creatures calls come. Now if I was right last week in suggesting the living creatures were the whole of the created order, it's the created order I think recognising the power of the creator and recognising his right to judge.

There is sympathy and more than sympathy in heaven for those who have suffered and rebellion is not endless. And so we look through the other judgments and we'll discover new things as well.

These are the basic and we remember as we end the words of the letter to the Hebrews. How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?

Let's pray. God our Father so often we do not fear you.

[29 : 17] So often we strut the rags and tatters of our own righteousness in front of you. We thank you that you have in your word torn aside that veil and shown us the reality of the Lamb who is the judge, the most merciful saviour, judge eternal.

Help us indeed to flee to him and hide in him, hide in him safely as the cosmos crashes around us and waiting for the new heaven and the new earth wherein dwells righteousness.

We thank you for this security and we praise you for this wonderful gospel in his name. Amen.