

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Revelation</b>		Pastor/Teacher
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<b>Text:</b>	<b>Revelation 9:12-23; Romans 2:1-16</b>		
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### THE OVERTURE OF WRATH TO COME FALLS ON DEAF EARS (Part 1)

There is no getting away from the fact that a great deal of Revelation is taken up with wrath, anger and judgment. We shudder at terrible spectacles like the great battlefield where carrion fowl gorge themselves on the bodies of fallen soldiers and horses. What could possibly be achieved by these kinds of horrors? Are they simply fear tactics meant to bully us into submission, or is there some other purpose behind them? Even if we can discern the point of these visions of destruction and carnage, what do they reveal about the God who participates in them? Surely judgment played out in such violent terms contradicts the love and forgiveness preached by the Jesus of the Gospels. The Sermon on the Mount teaches the followers of Jesus to love their enemies (Mt. 5:44) and to “turn the other cheek” to those who mistreat them (Mt. 5:39). The apostle Paul teaches us never to repay anyone evil for evil (Rom. 12:17). Yet Revelation seems to depict a God bent on vengeance, and the followers of the Lamb crying out for the destruction of their persecutors (6:10). At one point, people are cowering in caves and holes in the ground, longing to die if only to escape from “the wrath of the Lamb” (6:15-17). What are we to make of all this? The first thing to realize is that Revelation is by no means alone in speaking of wrath and judgment – the theme runs through the whole Bible, the New Testament as much as the Old. Consider, for example, some of the sayings of Jesus:

And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched (Mk. 9:47-48).

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt. 13:41-42).

Nor were pictures of wrath and judgment foreign to Paul or the rest of the New Testament writers. Paul proclaims: “For those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil” (Rom. 2:8-9). The writer of Hebrews states: “For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (Heb. 10:26-27). In 2 Peter we read that “the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless” (2 Pet. 3:7). The point is evident: Revelation’s pictures of the wrath of God and of judgment are not unique in the Bible. They are, in fact, quite common.<sup>1</sup> Although these demonic plagues seem to be terrible, they do embody a merciful purpose (vv. 20-21). They are designed to turn people to repentance before it is too late. Throughout history, it has appeared on the surface that persons have been able to pursue a path of sin and to defy God with limited consequences. As the end approaches and the time of judgment draws near, God pours out on people a taste of His final

judgment and wrath. This is not because He takes pleasure in wrath but in order to warn people that the way of sin and defiance of God can lead only to disaster. God does not desire that any person should suffer His judgment but that all should repent and turn to Him (Luke 13:3, 5; 2 Pet. 3:9). But when God's works and words are persistently rejected, only judgment remains (Eph. 5:6; Heb. 10:26-31). One would think that the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues (v. 20), would learn a lesson from the one-third who were killed. Surely they would repent in fear and trembling. But this is not so. They do not repent because they continue in their defiant path of worshiping demons and idols (v. 20). Since John in verse 20 distinguishes the cultic objects (idols) from the demons, he no doubt shared Paul's concept of demons as evil spirits (Rev. 16:14; 18:2). Thus, there is a twofold evil in idol worship. First, it robs the true God of His glory (Rom. 1:23). Second, it leads to consorting with evil spirits which corrupt people. "Sorceries" in verse 21 means "a practice of magic arts," or "witchcraft" in degraded religious practices (Ex. 7:11; 9:11; Gal. 5:20; Rev. 21:8; 22:15). The defiance of the rest of humanity is reflected not only in their idolatry but also in their immorality (v. 21). Here is the same theology taught by Paul in Romans 1:18 and following verses. Ungodliness issues in all kinds of unrighteousness and wickedness. The word "immorality" designated sexual sin in general.<sup>2</sup>

Before examining Revelation 9:12-21 in detail, I want to turn your attention to Romans 2:1-16. When sin can be culturally redefined, it will not take long before any particular sin becomes a virtue! In this section of the epistle, Paul expressly tells us in verse 3:9 that he is striving to convince both Gentiles and Jews that they are guilty in the eyes of God for their particular sins. Chapter one focuses on the sins of the Gentile world and chapter two undertakes to demonstrate to the Jews that they too are guilty before God and, therefore, likewise subject to judgment. I am reminded of the preacher who preached on Hebrews 2:3, a text that declares, "How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" The preacher proceeded to give his congregation a "How-To" list of how to go about escaping God's judgment if they did ignore such a great salvation! Interestingly enough, all of his points were drawn from the four possibilities of escape for those who offend human laws. In the first place, it is possible that the offense shall not become known. Illustrations of this in human experience abound. Second, there is always the chance that the guilty person may be able to escape the bounds of the legal jurisdiction under which the crime was committed. Further, there may occur, after apprehension by the authorities, a breakdown in the legal processes. And, finally, the ultimate hope of the criminal is that he may escape from detention and live in a measure of freedom. The major problem with such a scheme is that there are no such possibilities with an all-knowing God (cf. Hebrews 4:13). God's judgment is not only real and inescapable, it is absolutely just. Divine judgment by its very nature is always right. In Romans 2:1-16, the Apostle Paul will set forth the principles of divine judgment. He has already demonstrated the guilt of the Gentile world. He will now turn his attention to the Jew and those who think that their religiosity will somehow merit them special consideration. There are four variations of this theme in 2:1-16.

- I. ***GOD'S JUDGMENT IS ACCORDING TO REALITY (2:1-4).*** 2:1 in the Greek text begins with "Therefore" – *dio*. It is the strongest inferential conjunction the Apostle had at his disposal. It *links* what Paul is about to declare with what he has already stated. The Jews knew the sins of the Gentiles deserved God's wrath – but this did not alleviate their guilt. "Our own share of evil is not removed by condemning evil in others."<sup>3</sup> In 2:2, the first variation of the principle of righteous judgment is introduced. God judges according to *truth*. The judgment of God concerns itself with the reality of the matter (cf. 1 Sam. 16:7). Therefore, **no** escape is possible (2:3). God's goodness and patience does not mean He is indifferent to sin. To treat God so only shows contempt. Do you really think you can do this and escape God's judgment? The Apostle frames the question so that the answer is obvious. "The verb translated *think* (which comes first in the Greek), is quite Pauline. It is properly an arithmetical word and means *to count; to reckon*. But it is often used metaphorically

where numbers are not in question with a meaning like *take into account; reckon; consider*. It is a word that invites to reasoning, which may be why it turns up so often in Romans. It is suited to the argumentative style that Paul adopts throughout this letter.”<sup>4</sup>

- II. ***GOD’S JUDGMENT IS ACCORDING TO WORKS (2:5-11)***. The *second* variation of Paul’s theme is now developed. The Jews by refusing the Gospel are, in fact, storing up wrath for themselves on the day that God will render to each person exactly what their deeds deserve. Remember, Paul is expounding the Law – which can only condemn. “God’s judgment is not according to one’s special privileges, but according to one’s deeds, as the Mosaic Law itself teaches.”<sup>5</sup>
- III. ***GOD’S JUDGMENT IS ACCORDING TO IMPARTIALITY (2:12-15)***. The third variation is introduced. God’s judgment is just. He deals with all as they deserve whether Jew or Gentile. Each is judged by the light they possess, whether it is the light of the Mosaic Law, the moral law, or conscience. Note carefully that the light men possess by nature (general revelation) is not sufficient to bring salvation. God will deal with individuals according to the knowledge they have – but mere knowledge of God’s being and expectations will not satisfy divine justice. “The only virtue in hearing the law lies in hearing to do. This is exceedingly simple. A child might hear his parent’s command, might admire the clearness of his voice and the perspicuity of his words, but what of his approval if he did not obey and do as told?”<sup>6</sup> The point Paul is making is this: all men stand accused by the law of nature, the conscience and the memory. These three witnesses for prosecution will render everyone without excuse when they stand before God’s tribunal.
- IV. ***GOD’S JUDGMENT ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL (2:16)***. Paul is seeking to drive people from their false hopes. This section of the epistle has been described as “a general statement of divine principles of judgment, made in order to destroy the refuge of lies.”<sup>7</sup> God’s judgment will deal with outward conduct, but also secret or hidden things. This is a reference to the secret motions and motives of the heart (cf. 1 Sam. 16:7; Psalm 139:1-2; Jeremiah 17:10). This is clearly stated as well by Jesus (Matt. 6:4, 6, 18). This will occur on the appointed Day of Judgment. Note the role Paul gives the Gospel. Some think this awkward or strange. But the Gospel does *not* preclude the thought of judgment, as Morris has written; it demands it. “Unless judgment is a stern reality, there is nothing from which sinners need to be saved and accordingly, no *good news*, no gospel.”<sup>8</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** In Romans 2:1-16, he is unfolding God’s distributive justice.<sup>9</sup> The Apostle Paul is reaffirming the truth of Numbers 32:23 – “be sure of this, your sin will find you out.” There will be no escaping the day of God’s judgment. It is coming, and with each passing moment it draws closer. God *must* judge sin – all sin. He can do no other. He is holy and righteous in all that he does. How will you fare before Him? What will you do when He calls you to account? The Gospel message declares that Jesus Christ, God’s own dear Son, died for sinners. He was judged in their stead. He atoned for their sins. Heed the words from Augustus Toplady’s famous hymn, “When I soar to worlds unknown, See Thee on Thy judgment throne, Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.”

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Paul Spilsbury, *The Throne, The Lamb and The Dragon: A Reader's Guide To The Book of Revelation* (IVP, 2002), p. 109-111.

<sup>2</sup> J. P. Newport, *The Lion and The Lamb* (Broadman Press, 1986), p. 210.

<sup>3</sup> Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God* (Hendrickson, 1995), p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (IVP, 1988), p. 111.

<sup>5</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., *Romans: Believers Bible Bulletin* (Believers Chapel, 1980), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> James Stifler, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Revell, 1949), p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> W. H. Griffith-Thomas, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1962), p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> L. Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> Herman Bavinck has succinctly summarized the distributive Justice of God. "His holy nature requires also that outside of Himself, in the world of creatures, He keep righteousness in force, and, without respect of persons reward everyone according to his works (Romans 2:2-11 and 2 Corinthians 5:10). Nowadays there are those who try to make themselves and others believe that God pays no attention to the sinful thoughts and deeds of men. But the true, the living God, whom Scriptures present to us, thinks very differently about this. His wrath is kindled terribly against native and actual sins, and He wants to punish them both temporally and eternally by way of a righteous judgment (Deuteronomy 27:26 and Galatians 3:10). *Our Reasonable Faith* (rpt. Baker, 1977), p. 141.