“TRUE AND JUST ARE YOUR JUDGMENTS”

Revelation 15:1–16:21

Key Verse: 16:7

“And I heard the altar respond: ‘Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.’”

 More and more in our society people don’t like punishment. If somebody is punished, people get mad and say, “That’s not fair!” or “You didn’t understand that person!” When the Bible says that God punishes, for many it becomes a problem. “Who does this God think he is?” they say. Today’s passage is the third and final series of seven acts of God’s judgment on the world. Surprisingly, it says God’s judgment is something “great and marvelous” (15:1,3), a source of joy and hope. People are even singing a song about it! (15:3b,4) The passage repeats that God’s judgments are true and just (15:3; 16:5,7). In this study we want to learn better who God is, and why it’s so important to see his judgment as a good thing. May God speak to us through his living word today.

 As we’ve seen, the Book of Revelation contains many visions of the end of the world. Actually the entire Old and New Testaments predict it. It’s called “the day of the Lord,” or Judgment Day, when Jesus will come again as Judge. Jesus said this world is deceptive, with its false prophets, wars, earthquakes, famines, and persecutions. He said wickedness will increase, and the love of most will grow cold (Mt24:4ff.). He promised that in the end he’ll come again on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory, and gather his elect from all over the world. Revelation describes all this in greater detail. We may wonder why. John wrote this in his old age, after he himself had been tortured. He could see that many of God’s people would be persecuted for their faith. God gave John these visions to write down, to inspire his suffering people with faith and hope.

 At the beginning of chapter 12 John saw “a great sign in heaven” of a woman about to have a baby, and another “sign” of an enormous red dragon trying to destroy her and her offspring. Now he sees a third “sign.” Look at 15:1. This time it’s “a great and marvelous sign.” What is it? It’s “seven angels with the seven last plagues.” Why are they “last”? He explains: “…because with them God’s wrath is completed.” It implies God’s wrath has already started. Earlier, the two consecutive series of seven seals and seven trumpets brought God’s wrath partially—a “fourth,” and then, a “third” (6:8; 8:7–12). Yet those series—the seven seals and the seven trumpets—also describe God’s full wrath. When the sixth seal was opened, John saw the sun turn black, the whole moon blood red, and the stars in the sky fall to the earth (6:12,13; cf. Jl2:31; Mt24:29; Ac2:20). Then he heard the kings of the earth say to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the *wrath* of the Lamb! For *the great day of their wrath* has come, and who can withstand it?” (6:16,17; cf. Hos10:8). Later, in chapter 11, John saw a vision of 24 elders in heaven, saying to God, “The nations were angry, and your *wrath* has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your people who revere your name, both great and small—and for destroying those who destroy the earth” (11:18). Then in chapter 14 John saw a vision of an angel; he was warning that those who worship the beast “…will drink the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his *wrath*” (14:10a). He saw another angel swing his sickle on the earth, gather its grapes and throw them into “*the great winepress of God’s wrath*” (14:19). Now as these seven angels bring these seven plagues, God’s wrath is “completed.”

What is “God’s wrath”? It’s different from human wrath, which can be irrational, or just sheer anger, grief or fury. God’s wrath is his absolute hatred for sin and evil. John is the Bible author who made the amazing statement, “God is love” (1Jn4:8,16). John wrote, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn3:16). John said God didn’t send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him (Jn3:17). John described God’s love as so great, so lavish (1Jn3:1). But as his love is great, so great is his wrath. John says that for people who reject the Son, God’s wrath remains on them (Jn3:36).

The whole Bible talks about God’s wrath. God gave the world a glimpse of his wrath when he destroyed the totally wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Ge19). He gave another glimpse of it when he sent his ten plagues on rich and arrogant Egypt (Ex7:14–11:10). God gave yet another glimpse when he sent the Israelites into Babylonian Captivity. John the Baptist talked about “the coming wrath” (Mt3:7). Jesus predicted God’s wrath against his people (Lk21:23). Paul wrote that God’s wrath “is being revealed” against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness (Ro1:18). He said we all are deserving of God’s wrath because of our sinful nature (Eph2:3). But he also said God “bore with great patience the objects of his wrath” (Ro9:22). Throughout the ages God has been waiting to fully reveal or complete his wrath. Why is he waiting, holding back his wrath? Because God is rich in kindness, tolerance and patience; he’s not slow to bring about his justice; he’s trying to lead everyone to repentance (Ro2:4; 2Pe3:9). But when we’re stubborn and unrepentant we store up wrath against ourselves for the day of God’s wrath (Ro2:5). Revelation says that when Jesus comes again, all peoples on earth will mourn because of him (1:7). It says that Jesus is the one who searches hearts and minds, and he will repay each of us according to our deeds (2:23). Revelation repeatedly says that from God’s throne in heaven there are flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder (4:5; 11:19; 16:18). It’s a stunning image of God’s impending wrath. Through the seven seals and the seven trumpets God has been patiently giving people the chance to repent. Now, through these seven last plagues, God reveals fully his long-awaited wrath against all sin.

Then suddenly, the vision changes. Look at 15:2. In John’s earlier vision this “sea of glass” was in heaven, in front of the throne of God (4:6). Here, “those who had been victorious over the beast and its image” are those who accepted the blood of the Lamb, Jesus, and held onto their personal testimony about him (12:11). In chapter 14 they’re the 144,000 redeemed from the earth who worship the Lamb, remain pure and become like him (14:1–5). Here it says God gives them harps, and they’re singing “the song of God’s servant Moses and of the Lamb.” What’s this song? Moses’ song is the one he sang after the ten plagues, when God finally delivered his people from Egypt (Ex15). Mainly his song described God as the best “warrior” who defeated all the enemies of his people and brought them to his eternal dwelling. The song of the Lamb is in Revelation 5. There, the four living creatures and 24 elders sang a new song to the Lamb Jesus, who is worthy because he was slain and with his blood purchased people for God and made them a kingdom and priests to serve God and reign on the earth (5:9,10). An innumerable throng of angels also sang, “Worthy is the Lamb!” (5:11,12). Finally, the Lamb’s song was sung by every creature in all creation (5:13,14). But this time, in 15:3,4, the song has a different emphasis.

Read 15:3b,4. This is a very God-centered song. He’s called “Lord God Almighty,” “King of the nations” and “Lord”—in other words, he’s above all. The dragon, the beast and the false prophet try to imitate him, but they don’t even come close. Despite all their scheming they’re fake, whereas God is real. God has great and marvelous deeds, true and just ways. He alone is holy, and he’s the one all nations will worship. *He’s* the one to be feared. *He’s* the one to be glorified. *He’s* the one who deserves praise. It’s interesting that this song is because of the plagues God will release on the world. It seems hard to praise God for his plagues of judgment. We need to open our minds to learn why.

Right after the song, John sees another scene. Read verse 5. It continues the great and marvelous sign in verse 1. It begins with the temple in heaven—the place where God dwells, where God is forever worshiped. It’s “the tabernacle of the covenant law.” Earlier it’s described the same way, in 11:19a: “Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant.” Why does John emphasize that God’s tabernacle or the ark of his covenant law are in the temple in heaven? Partly it’s to remind us that the earthly tabernacle was a shadow of the heavenly one (Heb8:5). But really it’s to remind us of the heart of God’s character. What’s at the heart of God’s character?

First of all, the tabernacle in heaven tells us that God longs to be close to us. In Exodus, God gave Moses instructions on how to build the tabernacle. It would be the place where God would dwell with his people. But it wasn’t easy. Atonement for their chronic sins had to be made, everything had to be purified and carefully done in God’s way. But when God redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, in his heart of hearts he wanted to dwell with them closely. In fact, God wants to dwell with all humanity, even though we’re so sinful. This is why he sent Jesus, also called “the Word who became flesh,” who “made his dwelling” or “tabernacled” among us (Jn1:14). Through repentant faith in the blood of Jesus, we can enjoy fellowship with God and with one another (1Jn1:7). At the end of Revelation, heaven is described as the place where God will dwell with his people forever. Revelation 21:3 reads, “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.” It may seem that in his wrath, God just wants to get rid of us and be as far away from us as possible. But really, he longs to be close to us.

Secondly, the heart of God’s character is his holiness, righteousness and justice. In God’s temple in heaven is the tabernacle of the covenant law. It represents the Ten Commandments, which were placed inside. These laws of righteousness and justice reveal God’s own character and are closest to his heart. Through dwelling with him, God wants to help his people to know his righteous character and become more like him. As we draw closer to God and grow to love him more, our attitude toward sin changes. Instead of longing for sin, we begin to hate sin the way God hates it, and instead, to long for his holiness, righteousness and justice. When we know God’s righteous character, we can praise him for finally bringing his justice on earth.

Look at verse 6. These angels would have to bring seven plagues on the earth. But they’re dressed in clean, shining linen with golden sashes around their chests (cf. Da10:5). It’s the way Revelation describes Jesus himself (1:13); later it says believers also will be dressed in bright and clean fine linen, representing their righteous acts (19:7,8). It points to our glorious heavenly hope. Look at verse 7. Previously, golden bowls were filled with the prayers of God’s people (5:8); this time, they’re filled with God’s wrath. It tells us that God’s wrath will come on the earth in answer to his people’s prayers. Look at verse 8. The smoke filling the temple represents the glory and power of God. It also says that no one could enter. It means that when God’s final wrath is about to begin, no one can stop him—he will hear no more intercessory prayers.

In chapter 16 the seven bowls of God’s wrath are actually poured out. The first is on the land, the second is on the sea, the third is on the rivers and springs, the fourth is on the sun, the fifth is on the throne of the beast, the sixth is on the Euphrates River, and the seventh is on the air. These plagues are similar to God’s plagues on Egypt, but this time, they’re on the whole world. In each case the bowls bring suffering on people. The first bowl gives people ugly, festering sores. The second and third bowls turn all the water on earth to thick blood, people have nothing to drink, and their economies are ruined. The fourth bowl causes people to be seared by intense heat from the sun. The fifth bowl plunges people into darkness. The sixth bowl stirs up the worst war the world will ever see. And the seventh bowl causes the worst earthquake ever, and huge, 100-pound hailstones fall on people.

Throughout this terrible wrath, God is giving people what they deserve. Those who accepted the mark of the beast get the sores. Those who shed the blood of God’s people get only blood to drink. There’s even a pronouncement about it. Look at 16:5. Just as in the song in chapter 15, it’s declared that God’s judgments are just, and that God is holy (15:3,4). Look at 16:6. This description lies at the heart of God’s justice. Though people forget, God never forgets it when blood has been shed (Ge4:10). God demands an accounting if we shed someone’s blood (Ge9:5,6). God especially demands an accounting for the blood of his servants, who loved and served him. Revelation repeatedly mentions the great injustice that the blood of God’s precious servants was shed by their persecutors (6:10; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2). In a sense, God holds the whole world responsible for it. Jesus once said: “Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all” (Lk11:50,51). In our sinful nature we’re all responsible for shedding this blood.

But we shouldn’t get confused. *We* shouldn’t judge, and *we* aren’t agents of God’s wrath. We shouldn't take revenge but leave room for God's wrath and be kind to others (Ro12:19). As followers of Jesus we need to pray for people to be forgiven (Lk23:34a; 6:37; 11:4; 17:3,4). But as God’s people we do need to be deeply interested in seeing God’s justice done. The Bible says Jesus came to proclaim God’s justice to the nations and to bring justice to victory (Mt12:18,20; cf. Isa 42:1–4). He taught us not to focus only on keeping minor rules, but on the more important matters of the law, starting with justice (Mt23:23). We need to do our best to practice justice. If we’ve been hurt, we need to cry out to God for his justice (Lk18:7,8). Where we see injustice, we should care, pray, and act.

Read 16:7. It seems so unusual for the altar to respond to what the angel said. But in the vision, the altar itself speaks, for emphasis. Actually, in three places Revelation proclaims that God’s judgments are “true and just” (15:3; 16:7; 19:2). In this fallen world we can get so used to injustice that we start thinking all punishment is unjust. But all God’s judgments are always true and just. We can’t always trust people, but we can always trust God. We tend to have our own standards of justice, but God’s standards of justice are best. We can always be sure that God is the Judge of all the earth, and that in the end, God will certainly do what’s right (Ge18:25). But honestly, sometimes we don’t like what’s going on in the world. We may not like what’s going on in our personal lives, either. Tragic events or people’s behavior can seem so disturbing or painful. But because God’s judgment will be true and just, we have a reason to struggle, a reason to hope. It tells us that God sees everything, and that everything we do matters. We need faith to confess, “Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.”

The author also notes how people respond to God’s just punishments. In verses 9,11 and 21 it says they curse God. In Greek it literally says “blaspheme” God. This is exactly what the beast does (13:1,5,6). It means that those who worship the beast eventually become like him—totally hardened against God. Usually when people are punished, we hope they’ll learn a lesson, change their ways, repent. But here, when God punishes the world, people curse him to the end. So we shouldn’t be surprised.

In verses 12–14 John goes into great detail about his vision of demonic spirits that go out into the world to inspire leaders to rise up against God. He’s again reminding us of the great spiritual battle we face as we live in this world. Then suddenly John records the voice of Jesus. Read 16:15. Some people think they’ve got the time table of the end of the world all figured out, but the Bible repeatedly says Jesus will come again like a thief (Mt24:43; 1Th5:2–4; 2Pe3:10). Just as nobody expects to get robbed, so Jesus will come at a time when we least expect him (Mt24:44; Lk12:40). Here, to “stay awake” means to be spiritually aware, alert, and faithfully hoping to see him. To remain “clothed” means to keep our commitment to him every day, and to be eagerly serving him. Paul puts it this way: “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful” (Col4:2). When people see the world going downhill, they tend to plunge into reckless abandon. Jesus wants us not to live like that, but to be ready for his coming even at the most unexpected time.

Today we mainly thought about who God is. He’s the Lord God Almighty who alone deserves our worship. He’s the God of love, but also the God of great wrath against sin. We also learned that his judgments are true and just. May God help us to see people and the world from his point of view, to long for his justice, and to be ready for Jesus to return anytime.