

Lesson 7: Revelation 16

Opening Question: What things make you really angry?

Opening Prayer: Guide us, Holy Spirit, that as we read and study today, we will learn more about who God is and will long to live our lives for him. Amen!

Read aloud Revelation 16.

Read Wright:

I was cycling down the road one day when I came up beside my former tutor. I had studied the New Testament with him some years before, and was now engaged on some early work towards my doctorate.

‘How are you getting on?’ he asked. ‘How’s it going?’

At that stage I was up to my neck in Romans 1.18—3.20. Readers of Paul will know that this passage is mostly about God’s wrath against all human wickedness – in other words, against all of us.

‘Actually,’ I confessed, ‘I’m having a hard time with wrath.’

‘Aren’t we all!’ he replied cheerfully, and cycled off.

I think I know what he meant. We would all much rather live in a world without wrath. We would all much rather imagine a God without wrath. In fact, a substantial part of mainstream Western Christianity has imagined just that – and has followed through on the consequences. H. Richard Niebuhr, one of America’s most famous twentieth-century theologians (and brother of the even more famous Reinhold Niebuhr), once memorably described the message of much ultra-liberal Christianity: ‘A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.’ Pretty damning, that. We might have preferred a ‘gospel’ like that, but it certainly isn’t the one we’ve got.

And it certainly doesn’t match the world we’ve got. That’s the problem. In any family, school, business, country – in any organization or system of whatever sort – there will be deep problems. Things will go wrong. Human pride, greed, fear or suspicion will take over. Unless it is spotted, named and dealt with, it will only get worse. If it is allowed to flourish unchecked, it can even be hailed as a new way of living. The story of the twentieth century was in part the story of just that, as new ways of being – Communism, Fascism and Apartheid being the three most obvious – reared their ugly heads and did untold damage to people and societies, until eventually they collapsed under their own weight, not least the weight of the lies which were needed to sustain them. It was partly because H. Richard Niebuhr could see this going on that he warned against a wrathless, sinless, crossless message. It might lull us to sleep just when we needed to be wide awake.

The 'wrath' of the creator God consists of two things, principally. First, he allows human wickedness to work itself out, to reap its own destruction. Second, he steps in more directly to stop it, to call 'time' on it, when it's got out of hand. If we knew our business, we would thank God for both of these, even though both can appear harsh. They need to be. If they were any less than harsh, the wickedness in question would merely pause, furrow its brow for a moment, and then carry on as before. What we see here, in the first four plagues, is a mixture of both types of 'wrath' (141-142).

Because of the nature of his love, he will not always be stepping in and calling 'time' before the appointed moment. If he did, too many, who might yet repent and be rescued, would be caught in the middle. But he will let evil take its course and bring its own nemesis; and, at a moment which only he is in any position to judge, he will bring the necessary closure on the world's wrongs. This he must do if he is, indeed, the father of Jesus the Messiah. This is what it means that the angels pour out the bowls of his wrath upon the earth, the sea, the rivers and the sun (143, 144).

Bonus info: What is "Armageddon?" In Revelation 16:6, John says that the kings of the whole world will assemble for battle at "the place that in Hebrew is called Harmagedon." *Har* is the Hebrew word for mountain, and *Meggido* is a location in Israel, so Har-Magedon is Mount Meggido. This is a strategic location in Israel where many battles took place. John doesn't use the word literally. As with just about everything else in Revelation, Harmagedon is a symbolic place that the readers would have understood generically as "battleground." (See also Wright pp. 147-148)

Optional Discussion Questions

1. The book of Revelation is very clear about the wrath of God. Wright presents that wrath in a positive light: God allows human wickedness to work itself out and then God steps in to stop it when it's gotten out of hand.
How does this understanding of God's wrath comfort and/or trouble you?

2. The hymn *In Christ Alone* includes these lines:

*Till on that cross as Jesus died,
the wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live*

How does having learned more about the wrath of God help you better understand Jesus' sacrifice?

Closing Prayer:

Your ways are not our ways, O God. Your thoughts are not our thoughts. We grow impatient at the delay of your return, not realizing that you are making all things beautiful in your time. We

are uncomfortable with your wrath, not realizing that your wrath is what leads to total justice. We long for the beautiful justice that is yet to come. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.