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Revelation 15:1-8

26th Message

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GOD INCOMPARABLE

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

The news from the Middle East this past week has not been good. Israel continues to strike far into Lebanon in its efforts to cripple Hezbollah, an enemy committed to its destruction. There has been massive collateral damage, the recently-thriving Lebanese economy has been shattered, and countless civilians are suffering. Meanwhile, Hezbollah continues to fire rockets deep into Israel and grows in popularity throughout the Moslem world. The West seems unable to come up with a solution, though finally yesterday agreement was reached on a draft UN resolution. The ferocity of Israel's response and the resilience of Hezbollah have taken the world by surprise.

Meanwhile in Iraq the situation goes from bad to worse. On Thursday two four-star generals testified to Congress that civil war is a real possibility. And then there is Iran, looming menacingly on the horizon! What is the West to do about this region that seems to be rapidly spinning out of control? No one seems to have any convincing solutions.

The rules of war have changed. In former wars, when military forces wore uniforms, declared war and engaged in pitched battles, it was relatively easy to target the combatants while sparing the non-combatants. It's a lot more difficult now. How do you take out the bad guys without destroying the good guys? Who are the bad guys and the good guys anyway? How do you turn bad guys into good guys so that the cycle of violence stops?

In short, how do you work judgment and salvation simultaneously? Judgment so that the bad guys are stopped. Salvation so that the good guys are delivered, and, if possible, the bad guys are turned into good guys. I am at a complete loss as to solutions for the multiple conflicts in the Middle East. But the seeming intractability of these conflicts has prompted me to ponder the much greater problems of salvation history. How does God act so as to restrain evil while simultaneously ensuring that there is a community to enjoy the world that has been rid of evil? Or, to put it bluntly, how does God reconcile judgment and salvation?

Most people think that the book of Revelation is about judgment. But, as I hope we've seen the past two weeks, and indeed throughout this whole series, this book is just as much about salvation. No, it's more about salvation than it is about judgment. The book ends with salvation not judgment, with a renewed cosmos not a destroyed one. Today we continue to explore the twin themes of judgment and salvation as we come to chapter 15.

Chapter 15 is arranged as three separate visions which John saw (vv 1, 2-4, 5-8).

A. Vision 1: The seven plagues (15:1)

I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God's wrath is completed. (Rev 15:1 NIV)

In the first vision John sees in heaven another sign. This is the third and final sign seen in heaven. The first sign was a woman about to give birth (12:1-2). The second sign was a dragon standing in front of the woman ready to devour her baby (12:3-4). This third sign is seven angels with the seven last plagues which bring God's wrath to completion.

A sign points to something else; it is symbolic of something. The three signs seen in heaven present a symbolic portrayal of salvation history. It's a history that started all the way back in Genesis 3. There the serpent, symbolic of Satan, deceived the woman into following the desires of her eyes rather than heeding the word of the Lord. She saw that the fruit was good and she took. Every sin since has been but a variation on that theme: we see what is good in our own eyes and we take. In so doing we reject both what God declares to be good and the good which he provides us.

Last week I was asked whether God loves Satan. God makes no effort to save Satan. Instead he curses him (Gen 3:14). Curse is the opposite of bless, which means to endow with success and fruitfulness. Curse therefore means to consign to futility. Henceforth, God will frustrate Satan, rendering all his efforts futile.

In contrast, God pursues the man and the woman, calling to them in the garden and giving them an opportunity to confess their sin. Even when they do not repent but instead pass the buck, he initiates a plan that will lead to redemption. God's purposes for humanity are redemptive, salvific. His purposes for Satan are not so. Central to this plan of redemption is the birth of a son. God says to Satan,

**"I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel." (Gen 3:15)**

In this, the protoevangelium (first gospel), God announces a future battle between the woman's seed and the serpent's seed. The rest of the Old Testament can be read as the conflict between these two seeds, as the birthing of the woman's seed and Satan's efforts to eliminate that seed. Along the way God reveals the identity of this seed with increasing specificity: it will be descended from Shem, from Abraham, from Jacob, from Judah, from David. Along the way God overcomes barrenness to make it very clear that this seed will be by divine gift not by human effort. Along the way Satan makes several attempts to destroy the seed, through Pharaoh, Athaliah, Herod.

This is the great drama portrayed in the first two signs. The seed foreseen in Gen 3:15 is about to be born, and Satan, the dragon, is poised ready to devour him. The son is born, the dragon pounces, but the son is gone! Snatched up to God in heaven (Rev 12:5). The dragon is foiled. He's cursed, his actions are futile, destined to be frustrated by God. Enraged, he goes off to make war on the saints, something which God mysteriously allows him to do. In this endeavor he enlists two henchmen: the beast of tyrannical power and

the false prophet of deception. But God has installed his king on Mount Zion: the son of the woman, the Lamb, the King. Satan has been unable to prevent the birth of the seed and he's been unable to prevent God's installation of the king over his kingdom. But the way God has done this is breathtaking: the Lion has conquered by being the slain Lamb. The Son, the woman's seed, has conquered Satan by being killed, which is what Satan had been trying to do all along. The Son has conquered death by being put to death himself. Rising as the firstborn from the dead, he is liberating with his own blood a people for God. In his Son, God simultaneously worked judgment and salvation, judging the enemy in such a way that produced the salvation of many. It's astonishing! In the words of the hymn by D.A. Carson that we sang two weeks ago, none of the Old Testament sages "glimpsed the cross" or "thought that God would buy back rebels at such cost."¹

With the third sign we come to the denouement of this conflict. It is the completion of the drama portrayed in the first two signs, serving as the conclusion to the symbolic history that began in chapter 12. But it is also the resumption of an earlier series of visions, those that began in chapter 5. This third sign comprises seven angels with seven plagues, which we will see are to be poured out of seven bowls. This is the third and final series of seven judgments. The seven seals affected a quarter of the earth, the seven trumpets affected a third of the earth, and the seven bowls will affect all of the earth. I view these as three sets of variations on the same theme of divine judgment. Indeed, the seven trumpets are the seventh seal, and the seven bowls are the seventh trumpet (and also the third woe). The bowls are the final variation because they bring God's wrath to fulfilment.

Before the seven plagues are poured out upon a rebellious humanity in chapter 16, there is another interlude, a delay in the action. This interlude between the initial sight of the seven and the unfolding of the seven was present also in the seven seals and the seven trumpets. In each interlude John is shown something in heaven which helps understand the sevens on earth. In each interlude he is shown something that places divine judgment into context.

In the interlude between the initial sight of the seven-sealed scroll (5:1) and the unlocking of the seals (6:1), John is shown that the only one who can unlock those seals is the conquering Lion who is the slain Lamb. The key to history, for that is what the scroll represents, is the triumph of the slain Lamb. God exercises judgment upon a rebellious humanity only after he has provided salvation. The one whom he has appointed as Judge is also the one whom he has appointed as Savior. The way he has conquered is breathtaking: through the death and resurrection of his own Son.

In the interlude between the initial sight of the seven trumpets (8:2) and the blowing of the trumpets (8:6), John is shown the prayers of the saints rising from the heavenly altar, whereupon an angel hurls to earth a censer filled with fire from the altar (8:3-5). The seven trumpets are to be understood as God's response of judgment to the prayers of the saints. They have prayed, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (6:10).

Now between the initial sight of the seven plagues (15:1) and the pouring out of the plagues (16:1), John sees another interlude. Like the earlier interludes it provides context in which to understand the divine judgments. The interlude contains two separate visions (15:2-4, 5-8).

B. Vision 2: The Song of the Lamb (15:2-4)

And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb:

"Great and marvelous are your deeds,
Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways,
King of the ages.
Who will not fear you, O Lord,
and bring glory to your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship before you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed." (15:2-4)

John sees a sea clear as glass, the same crystal sea he had seen in 4:6. On or beside the sea are those who have conquered the beast. They hold harps given them by God and they sing. These are the saints whom we've seen several time before. They are the countless multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language who sing, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (7:9-10). They are the 144,000 standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion where they sing a new song before the throne (14:3). They are the army of the Lord, but they never actually do any fighting. All they do is sing, celebrating the victory that God has won, for salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb.

The song they sing is the song of Moses (Exod 15:1-18), which we read antiphonally to one another earlier in the service. It's the song which Moses led the Israelites in singing to the Lord as they stood beside another sea through which they had just come. There beside the sea they sang a song of celebration, praising God for the salvation he had accomplished for them and the judgment he had wrought on their enemies. God's actions with the sea brought both judgment and salvation: salvation for his people whom he brought through the sea, but judgment for Pharaoh and his armies whom he overwhelmed in the sea. No wonder they sang the words that are on the cover of our bulletin today,

"Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?
Who is like you—
majestic in holiness,
awesome in glory,
working wonders?" (Exod 15:11)

This declaration of the incomparability of God is the turning point of the song, from celebration of God's judgment upon the enemy to celebration of salvation for his people. Who is able to reconcile judgment and salvation but our incomparable God who works wonders?

Now the saints stand upon or beside another sea. But now the crystal sea is ablaze with fire, the fire of judgment. In the second interlude the fire of judgment burnt on the heavenly altar; now it infuses the sea. The saints have come through this fiery sea, victorious over the beast, his image and the number of his name. They have remained faithful to God even at the cost of their lives. It seemed as though the beast has conquered them by putting them to death (13:7), but it is they who have emerged the conquerors through the blood of the Lamb and their faithful witness (12:11). And so they

sing. It's a song of praise celebrating not their own victory over the beast, but God's victory.

Their song is a pastiche of quotes from the Old Testament. They acclaim that God's ways are great and marvelous, just and true. God's judgments upon his enemies are right and deserved, but he acts in such a way that he saves his people. It is because he is the universal sovereign that he has the authority both to judge and to save.

The second half of the song is breathtaking: the goal of God's judgments is universal worship! It incorporates a portion of Psalm 86 that served as our call to worship this morning:

**Among the gods there is none like you, O Lord;
no deeds can compare with yours.
All the nations you have made
will come and worship before you, O Lord;
they will bring glory to your name.
For you are great and do marvelous deeds;
you alone are God. (Ps 86:8-10)**

There it is again: celebration of the incomparability of God who works wonders. What are these wonders? The simultaneous accomplishment of salvation and judgment. God has revealed his righteous acts, with the result that all nations will come and worship him. The first angel with the eternal gospel had called upon all men to fear God, give him glory, and worship him (14:6-7). The third angel had pronounced judgment upon those who worship the beast, those who worship what is not fit to be worshiped (14:9-10). Then we had the vision of the grape harvest, showing the outpouring of God's wrath upon a rebellious humanity (14:17-20). Now the saints celebrate God's righteous acts. We expect this to mean judgment upon the idolaters, but what we find is that the effect of these righteous acts is to turn rebels into worshipers. Again the same three synonymous terms are used: fear God, give him glory, and worship him. Those who worship what is not fit to be worshiped have become those who worship God. The nations, who had been led astray into worshipping the beast, have been turned into those who worship God. Where we expected to find only judgment we find salvation!

How is this possible? The Old Testament had foreseen this. The song sung in verses 3-4 is drawn entirely from the Old Testament. But it takes the New Testament to understand how this happens. The song of Moses has become the song of the Lamb. The song *by* Moses has become the song *about* the Lamb. Beside the sea of old God revealed his righteous acts by simultaneously judging Pharaoh and saving his people. God has revealed his righteous acts in the Lamb, simultaneously working judgment and salvation. It is because of the triumph of the Lamb that all nations will come to worship God. All the earth-dwellers, every nation, language, tribe and tongue, has been deceived into worshipping the beast. But the Lamb is delivering people from that bondage; he is redeeming people from every nation, language, tribe and tongue to be the people of God.

In the sea God's judgment brought salvation for his people Israel. In the Lamb God's judgment brought salvation for all nations. At the end God's judgment will bring salvation for the entire cosmos. Beyond final judgment lie a new heavens and a new earth, a new Jerusalem into which the nations stream. The dragon, the beast, the false prophet, even death and Hades, will all be thrown into the lake of fire, the place of eternal judgment. God makes no effort to save them. But his goal for humanity is salvation. Sadly, people will also be thrown into the lake of fire; people who have persisted in their refusal to acknowledge their Creator. They have been called to

worship their Creator, but have refused. But the end of the story is not judgment but salvation: not a destroyed cosmos but a renewed cosmos, not the lake of fire but the New Jerusalem into which the nations stream bringing their glory to lay at the feet of God and the Lamb (22:24-26), a new Jerusalem full of former rebels who have become worshipers.

How will this happen? How will God work final judgment so that it accomplishes final salvation? I have no idea. Had I been standing with the Israelites, backed up against the sea, watching the Egyptians advance, I would have had no idea how God could work judgment on his enemies while simultaneously working salvation for his people. But he told the Israelites to stand firm and watch the judgment and salvation that he would simultaneously work (Exod 14:13). God accomplished salvation for his people without any help from them; indeed they wanted to go back to Egypt.

Had I been present in Jerusalem as Jesus was arrested, tried and condemned to death, I would have had no idea how God could work judgment on his enemies while accomplishing salvation for his people. But again he did so, in a way that far exceeded imagination. In the cross he judged sin, death and Satan, and he worked salvation for his people. Again it was without any help from his people. His people Israel had rejected Jesus, God's final prophet. And as for the rest of us, it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us (Rom 5:8).

In judgment God's righteous acts are revealed. But they are revealed in such a way as to accomplish salvation. This is what the song of Moses celebrated. This is what the song of the Lamb celebrates. This is what the saints are singing about as they are gathered beside the crystal sea. This is what God wants John to see before showing him the seven bowls of final judgment. This is what he wants us to understand about judgment: the God who judges is the God who saves. This evokes wonder and amazement. We should join Moses and David in saying, "There is none like God, who works wonders." We have an incomparable God. It is only an incomparable God who can do this. Who is like unto our God?

C. Vision 3: The Tabernacle of Testimony (15:5-8)

After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed. (15:5-8)

In John's third vision he sees in heaven the temple, the tabernacle of the testimony. This is the heavenly dwelling place of God, of which the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem were earthly copies. The tabernacle was called the tent of Testimony because it contained the two tablets of the Testimony, that is the Ten Commandments. This Decalogue, the Ten Words, was God's testimony or witness to Israel, showing her how to be holy in the presence of a holy God. The tablets of the Testimony were placed in the ark of the Testimony which was placed in the tent of Testimony. It was here, over the tablets of the Testimony, that God met with Moses.

What testimony is in the heavenly temple? No longer is it the Ten Commandments. The Law has been replaced by a much greater testimony, namely the Lamb. Jesus bore faithful witness to his Father. But he also constitutes the Father's witness or testimony to humanity. This book of Revelation is by John "who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:2). Jesus both bore witness to the word of God and is the Word of God. He is a much greater word than the Decalogue, the Ten Words. Though they were intended to convey life, the commandments conveyed only death, for they remained written on tablets of stone and not on human hearts. But God's testimony in his Son conveys life. Yes the Son will judge; he has already judged the supernatural powers of evil and he will judge those who persist in following those powers. But the Son also saves; he gives life to those who follow him through death into resurrection. He has become the meeting place between God and his people. No longer do we meet God over the tablets of the Law; now we meet him over his much greater testimony, the Lamb.

Out of this heavenly temple, this shrine to the saving grace of God exercised in Christ, come the seven angels with the seven plagues. Their procession from the temple indicates that they are authorized by God, but also that their mission is enabled by the Testimony, by the triumph of the Lamb. They are given seven bowls, the sort of bowls used in temple service. Previously these golden bowls had held the prayers of the saints (5:8). Now those prayers have been replaced by God's wrath, for God's judgments are at least partly in response to the prayers of his people. "Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we pray.

The last thing that John sees is the heavenly temple filled with God's glory. The smoke is of his glory cloud, his overwhelming presence, what the Jews would later call the *shekinah*, the indwelling presence of God in the Holy of Holies. The climax to the construction of the tabernacle and of the temple was the arrival of God's glory in the form of a cloud (Exod 40:34-35; 1 Kgs 8:10-11; 2 Chr 5:13-14). So overwhelming was this presence that Moses was unable to enter the tabernacle and the temple priests were unable to perform their service. In this vision of the heavenly temple, so overwhelming is God's presence that the angels cannot get back in until their mission is complete, until God's judgments are brought to fulfillment. But once God's wrath is complete, once his salvation is brought to fulfillment, his presence will no longer be overwhelming, for his people will see his face (22:4).

With this vision of God's overwhelming presence, the interlude is over. God sends the angels forth to pour out his wrath, to exercise his judgment (16:1). As the seventh bowl is poured out, the cry goes up, "It is done!" (16:17).

D. Our incomparable God

Revelation depicts the judgments of God against those who oppose him. These judgments are portrayed as three sets of seven: seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls. But it is crucial to notice how these judgments are set in context by the interludes. If you see just the judgments you will get a very one-sided view of God, a God who seems to adopt a scorched-earth policy. In the interludes we see the other side of God. In the interlude between the first vision of the seven seals and the opening of the seals we see the Lamb. In the in-

terlude between the first sight of the seven trumpets and the blowing of the trumpets we see the prayers of the saints ascending to God. Here in the interlude between the first sight of the seven plagues and the pouring out of the plagues we see the saints celebrating God's righteous acts revealed in the Lamb, whereby the nations come to worship God.

For too many people, their perception of this book is shaped by the judgments, by the series of seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls. They respond with fear or fascination: fear over the awful events depicted or fascination with the timetables of such events. But these responses are misplaced. We need to pay attention to the interludes which set the judgments in context. In these interludes we see the centrality of the triumph of the slain Lamb, we see that God heeds the prayers of the saints that his kingdom come, and we see the celebration of the saints at the revelation of the righteous acts of God which brings all nations to worship him. If we read these interludes aright, I trust we will respond not in fear or fascination, but in adoration and worship, joining Moses, the Israelites, David, and the saints beside the crystal sea in praising our incomparable God whose righteous acts accomplish so much more than we could ever imagine. He has revealed his righteous acts supremely through the Lamb, Jesus whom he has set in his heavenly temple as his testimony to a rebellious world.

I don't have a solution for Israel and Lebanon, nor for Iraq, nor for Iran. I don't know how the US or the West can act in such a way that evil is overcome, the good are vindicated, and rebels are turned into friends. It seems that so many of our actions have unintended consequences. But this just serves to show the incomparability of God who has done all this on a much grander scale. He has overcome evil, he has vindicated the good, and he has turned rebels into friends. To quote again from D. A. Carson's hymn: "Who has comprehended the wisdom of the Lord? For the grandeur of his plans our God must be adored." Amen!

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
"Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?"
"Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay him?"
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Rom 11:33-36)*

1. D. A. Carson, "In This Rebel World," in *Shout With Delight: New Songs for the People of God, Volume 1* (Trenton, Mich.: Christway Media, 2000).

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