

When I preach, if you notice, I usually preach through passages and books of the Bible, trying to communicate what the text meant in its original context and then what it means for us today. This is different than some other approaches, like the topical approach. This approach means that I can't skip anything, can't just pick and choose. This is both good and challenging. Sometimes you get Jesus and the good Samaritan, and sometimes you get Revelation 8:6 - 11:19. This is a very difficult section in more ways than one. All kinds of words have been spilled trying to figure out every last symbol. Let's take a high level view. Don't miss the forest for the trees.

Revelation was written by John, either the apostle John who wrote the gospel and the letters 1, 2, and 3 John, or by another John, an elder in the early church. It was written late 1st century, and is primarily concerned with encouraging Christians who were undergoing persecution in the Roman Empire. The biggest key to understanding this book is to read it according to its genre. It belongs to the genre called "apocalyptic literature." In apocalyptic literature, matters of the future or the spiritual realm are unveiled, usually through the agency of angels, in visions, lurid colors and with many crazy symbols. Apocalyptic literature is very visual. Instead of saying "Jesus is the judge" it shows Jesus with a sword coming out of mouth. Instead of saying Jesus is sovereign over his church, it shows him holding seven stars in his hand, which are the angels of the seven churches. Instead of saying that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of all the churches, he writes that they are the seven spirits before the throne. And instead of saying that the churches are lights, it depicts them as seven lampstands. In other words, do not read Revelation literally, but recognize that it is communicating in most cases familiar truths in very unique and highly visual ways. The point is to show that there is what we think is reality, and then there is what is really REALITY, which often we can not see with our own physical eyes.

There are different approaches to interpreting Revelation. I believe what's going on in these middle chapters is that John receives visions that keep going back over the same ground from different angles, highlighting different things, symbolized by seven seals, and then seven trumpets, and then seven bowls. The main message that repeats is this: believers will be persecuted. But God will protect their faith. Even if they lose their life, God will spare them His wrath and judgment. But those who are persecuting them will be judged for their oppression. Finally, those who have suffered will find eternal rest and joy with the Lord.

Let's read the passage:

Revelation 8:6 - 11:19 - Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them. ⁷ The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. ⁸ The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, ⁹ a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. ¹⁰ The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water-- ¹¹ the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter. ¹² The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night. ¹³ As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: "Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!" ^{NIV}

Revelation 9:1 The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. ² When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. ³ And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. ⁴ They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. ⁵ They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. ⁶ During those days men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them. ⁷ The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. ⁸ Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. ⁹ They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. ¹⁰ They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. ¹¹ They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon. ¹² The first woe is past; two other woes are yet to come. ¹³ The sixth angel sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar that is before God. ¹⁴ It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." ¹⁵ And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. ¹⁶ The number of the mounted troops

was two hundred million. I heard their number. ¹⁷ The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. ¹⁸ A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur that came out of their mouths. ¹⁹ The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury. ²⁰ **The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands;** they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood-- idols that cannot see or hear or walk. ²¹ Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts. ^{NIV} **Revelation 10:1** Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars. ² He was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand. He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, ³ and he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. ⁴ And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down." ⁵ Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. ⁶ And he swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, "There will be no more delay!" ⁷ But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets." ⁸ Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: "Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." ⁹ So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, "Take it and eat it. **It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.**" ¹⁰ I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. ¹¹ Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings." ^{NIV} **Revelation 11:1** I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there. ² But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months. ³ And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, **clothed in sackcloth.**" ⁴ These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. ⁵ If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. ⁶ These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are

prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want. ⁷ Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. ⁸ Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. ⁹ For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. ¹⁰ The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth. ¹¹ But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. ¹² Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here." And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on. ¹³ At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. ¹⁴ The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon. ¹⁵ The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever." ¹⁶ And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, ¹⁷ saying: "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. ¹⁸ 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 saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great-- and for destroying those who destroy the earth." ¹⁹ Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.

Let me share three main messages from this passage

1) Suffering is meant to wake us up to our need for God

These chapters are filled with judgment and suffering, but the question is, will the suffering lead to repentance?

²⁰ The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood-- idols that cannot see or hear or walk. ²¹ Nor did

they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.

Repentance is a churchy word, so let me define it for you:

Shubh (Heb) – A radical change in one’s attitude toward sin and God. It implies a conscious, moral separation, and a personal decision to forsake sin and to enter into fellowship with God.

Metamelomai (Grk) – To have a feeling of care, concern, or regret

Metanoeo (Grk) – To change the opinion or purpose with regard to sin; to turn one’s will from sin to God

Notice the parallels to the Exodus plagues. The Egyptian plagues were judgments for their hardness of heart, their idolatry, and for persecuting God’s people. The main parallel is the multiple judgments followed by an unwillingness to repent and turn to God.

When it comes to suffering, the Bible focus less on the “why” question and more on the “to what end.” Last week, we saw how sometimes suffering happens to refine us so that we will be more like Jesus. This week, we see that **suffering is meant to wake us up to our need for God so that we will repent of our self-centeredness and put our faith in the Lord.** Jesus alluded to this in Luke 13:

Luke 13:1-5 - *Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ² Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them-- do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."*

What should we think of tragedy? It wasn’t something they deserved. But see it as a warning to repent. Tomorrow is promised to no one. **Are you right with God?**

John 3:16-18 - *"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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not*

believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Suffering is meant to wake us up to our need for God so that we will repent.

As C.S. Lewis put it, *“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”*

Tomorrow is not promised, judgment is coming and it will make all this look like nothing.

Romans 2:7-10 *To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. ⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. ⁹ There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; ¹⁰ but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.*

CS Lewis calls Hell “the great monument to human freedom.” In the Great Divorce, he writes, *“There are only two kinds of people – those who say ‘thy will be done’ to God or those to whom God in the end says, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell choose it.”* Lewis writes that those who are in hell actually choose to be there and sustain themselves there by their own choice, like a child who has been told he can have dessert as soon as he apologizes to his sister for smacking her but would rather miss fudge and ice cream than apologize.

If a person has decided by his or her life that they do not want to know the God of the Bible, do not have faith in Him, and do not want to do His will, then God will honor their decision and give them their freedom. He does not send them to Hell; he honors their choice to live without Him.

So, once more, are you right with God?

Hebrews 4:7 - *Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."*

- 2) We are called to be witnesses, calling people to repent and believe the gospel

³ And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, **clothed in sackcloth.**" ⁴ These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth

The two witnesses represent the church, I believe. They will suffer, and it will seem like they are dead, but God will raise them to life. A witness testifies to what he has seen and what he knows.

Luke 24:46-48 - He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

Acts 1:8 - But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

This message is both good news and bad news.

⁸ Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: "Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." ⁹ So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, "Take it and eat it. **It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.**" ¹⁰ I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. ¹¹ Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings."

The gospel is both sweet and sour. It includes both salvation and condemnation. Eternal life and eternal separation, depending upon how people respond.

1 Corinthians 1:18 - For the message **of the cross** is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being **saved** it is the **power of God.**

2 Corinthians 2:14-16 - But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. ¹⁵ For we are to God the **aroma** of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. ¹⁶ To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.

As you share the gospel, some will rejoice, and others will revolt. Some will welcome you and others will persecute you. But given the visions that John saw and the reality that Jesus preaches, do you understand the fate of those who reject Christ?

Paul in Acts 20, speaking to the Ephesian elders:

Acts 20:20-21, 26-27 You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. ²¹ I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus...²⁶ Therefore, I declare to you today that I am **innocent** of the **blood** of all men. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

Can you say that you are innocent of the blood of all men?

This concept reminded me of a powerful video by Penn Jillette of the Las Vegas illusionist duo Penn & Teller. Penn Jillette is a very smart, outspoken atheist, and it is not hard to find videos online of him ridiculing religious people for their beliefs and practices. In one video, however, he spoke briefly of an encounter he had with a gentleman after one of his shows. Let me share some of what he said:

*He walked over to me and he said, "I was here at the show last night, I saw the show and I liked it." He was complimentary about my use of language and my honesty... he said nice stuff... and then he said "I brought this for you" and he gave me a pocket Gideon's Bible with the New Testament and Psalms... he said "I wrote in the front of this, and I wanted you to have it... I'm proselytizing... I want you to know I'm a businessman, I'm sane, I'm not crazy." And he looked me right in the eye, and it was really wonderful. I believe he knew that I was an atheist. But he was not defensive, and he looked me right in the eyes. And he was truly complimentary. It didn't seem in any way that it was empty flattery; he was kind, and nice, and sane, and looked me in the eye and talked to me, and then gave me this Bible. **And I've always said, I don't respect people who don't proselytize. If you believe there is a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever and you think "well, it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward."** How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate someone to believe that everlasting life is*

possible and not tell them that? If I believe that there is a truck bearing down on you, and you didn't believe it, there's a certain point at which I tackle you. And this is more important than that. This guy was a really good guy. He was polite and honest and sane and he cared enough about me to proselytize and give me a Bible which had written in it a little note to me and five phone numbers and an email address in case I want to get in touch. Now, I know there is no God, and one polite person living his life right doesn't change that. But I'll tell you, he was a very, very, very good man, and that's really important, and with that kind of goodness, it's okay to have that deep of a disagreement. I still think religion does a lot of bad stuff, but that was a very good man."

Who do you need to share the gospel with?

3) In the end, Christ will reign

Christ will reign with us forever on the renewed heaven and earth.

¹⁵ *The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever."* ¹⁶ *And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God,* ¹⁷ *saying: "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign."* ¹⁸ *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 saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great-- and for destroying those who destroy the earth."*

For those who have suffered and been persecuted, in the end God will reign with us on a renewed heaven and earth. No more tears, no more suffering. God will live with us. Evil will be destroyed. Everything will be perfect. Be sure that you are right with God, so that you will be there, and be a witness to others of the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that they will join you.