

Justice, Mercy, and the Collapse of Empire

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[0 : 0 0] We're talking about the book of Revelation. Revelation, if you want to join me in your Bibles, will be in Revelation chapters 15 and 16. As I alluded in my prayer earlier, we'll be talking about the wrath of God.

And so my attention getter that they taught me in seminary is about petty revenge. So I've got some slides on the screen for you. Here's an example of somebody parking over the line into a handicapped spot and the police putting a note on this person's window that says, we noticed you had a little trouble staying in the lines when you parked next to a handicapped space.

And I think maybe it's cut off, but it says, you can use this coloring page to practice staying in the lines and maybe that'll work for your driving as well. I love the idea of handing this out. Next slide is at work.

There's somebody at work who eats everyone's treats. So tomorrow they'll be getting a surprise. And it's what looks like a jelly-filled donut, but what is actually being inserted is some mustard, British mustard, which is especially pungent.

Next slide. Somebody tweets, the girl I used to go out with is still using my Netflix, and that's cool. She's watching Scandals, currently on season seven, episode 12. Series finale is season seven, episode 18.

[1 : 1 3] Guess who's changing her password as soon as she gets to episode 17? Yep, it's Petty LaBelle. Next slide. Next slide. I locked my cat in the bathroom while I made a meal because he was being annoying, so revenge was had and shredded.

Next slide. My boyfriend cheated on me, so I convinced him to get matching tattoos. He went first and I went home. And this one is an older woman who says, I'm so sick to death of watching you fighting over my money.

I'm not dead yet. So here you go. I'm spending it. I'm putting this message in every magazine I can find, and will keep doing so until the money is gone. Then maybe you can all stop bickering. Shame on you all.

Bernie. We love you, Bernie. We love you. All right. So, you know, some of us enjoy getting some petty revenge, but what happens when we're talking about cosmic revenge?

What about God's revenge on God's enemies? What about divine wrath poured out like bowls of destruction on the earth and onto people?

[2 : 2 2] And that's decidedly less fun. Terrifying. Especially when you realize that there are theological frameworks where we are the ones receiving that cosmic revenge.

Or, maybe even worse, we're the ones rooting it on. Yeah, God, go get them. Go pour out those bowls of wrath. So we're going to take a look today at Revelation chapter 15 and 16.

And it's one of these challenging pieces of Scripture where we see lots of violence being put into the actions of God.

And for folks like me, maybe like you, that believe in a nonviolent, loving God, this Scripture can sort of fly in the face of all of this.

It can be used to terrorize people, to justify violence, to create entire theological systems built on fear. But what I want, what I hope to show you today is that even here in some of the most violent, apocalyptic imagery in the Bible and in Revelation, I think we can negotiate with the text, and I think we can actually find some good news.

[3 : 3 3] So let's review, once again, the structure of the book of Revelation. At the big, big macro level, you've got the opening chapter, which is our opening vision, where John of Patmos, he's a political exile.

He receives a vision from Jesus. Chapters 2 and 3 are the letters to the churches in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, so Ephesus and Smyrna and Philadelphia, etc.

Chapters 4 through 20, the bulk of the book of Revelation is this sort of cosmic battle between Babylon, which represents Rome, and really all empires of the earth, versus heaven or the reign, the kingdom of God.

And then chapters 21 and 22 show us the new Jerusalem, the reality as it truly is, or as God wants it to be. And then if we zoom in to chapters 4 through 20, we see these three sets of three cosmic heavenly visions, which are then followed up by sets of seven.

So heavenly vision in chapters 4 and 5, followed by the seven seals, followed by the seven trumpets. And then another heavenly vision in chapters 11 through 15, followed by the seven bulls, and then a vision of the harlot.

[4 : 49] And then another heavenly vision in chapters 19 through 21, which leads us to the conclusion. So we're in that middle row, a heavenly vision which we've been exploring in the past couple weeks of sermons.

Now we're at the end of this heavenly vision in chapter 15, which we're about to read, and that will go into the seven bulls. As a reminder, Revelation cannot be read chronologically.

It's more of a spiral reading. So you're seeing things from different perspectives. And what we're about to read in chapter 15 is sort of the summary of everything else that's about to come after with all of these bulls of wrath.

So, this is Revelation chapter 15, verses 1 through 4. I want you to listen for a couple of things. Listen for the word last.

Listen for the word all. Okay? Revelation chapter 15, verse 1. Then I saw another portent, another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended.

[5 : 53] Now pause here for a second. The Greek word here for end has lots of different meanings. This also works somewhat similarly in English. Like if you are, you know, trying to eat well and exercise, and someone who is like opposed to those things asks you, to what end?

Okay? End here does not mean only conclusion or final thing. It means goal, purpose. To what reason are you doing these things?

So, we read, these are the last plagues, for with them the wrath of God is at its end, at its purpose, at its reason for being, its goal. And before the bowls are poured out, before any of the violent imagery happens, John records a song, and he calls it the Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb.

And John labeling this the Song of Moses is important, because John is tying this revelation to the Exodus, tying it to the Israelites leaving Egypt.

And this is what the song says, Lord, who will not fear or respect and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. Why are you holy? You alone are holy.

[7 : 05] Why? All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgments have been revealed. All nations will come and worship, not just the faithful, not just the elect, not those who believed in the right things, all nations.

And so, we see planted right into the middle of this complicated, sort of troubling text, a universalist strain of vision placed right into the moment of ultimate judgment.

Now, contrast this Revelation 15, Song of Moses, Song of the Lamb, with the actual Song of Moses in Exodus 15. And Exodus 15 is actually one of the oldest pieces of Hebrew writing in our scripture.

The Hebrew language, all of the imagery is used. It seems to be one of the oldest, most original pieces of scripture. And this is what it says in Exodus 15. The Israelites cross the Red Sea.

Pharaoh has just been buried. Pharaoh and his armies have just been buried by the waters. And then the people sing. I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously.

[8 : 11] How has he triumphed gloriously? Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, for he has become my salvation. This is my God, and I will praise him. My Father is God, and I will exalt him.

The Lord is a warrior. The Lord is his name. And so you hear this warrior language applied onto God. But you see the contrast from Revelation 15 to Exodus 15.

Why is God worthy of song? Because he has thrown a horse and rider into the sea in Exodus 15. In Revelation 15, why are you worthy of fear and glory and respect? For all nations will come and

worship before you.

Exodus, violence, revelation, all nations will come. Now I'm going to read into chapter 16. I'm going to skip around a little bit. But you get these seven plagues, these seven bowls of God's wrath that the angels pour out.

And we're not going to sugarcoat this. It's some violent, disturbing, hard language. Chapter 16, verse 1. I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.

[9 : 17] So the first angel went and poured his bowl on the earth. And a foul and painful sore came on those who had the brand of the beast and who worshipped its image. The second angel poured his bowl into the sea, and it became like blood, the blood of a corpse.

And every living thing in the sea died. And the third angel poured his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. And the fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire.

They were scorched by fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had authority over these plagues. And they did not repent and give him glory. And the fifth angel poured his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness.

People gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and sores, and they did not repent of their deeds. The sixth angel poured his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the east.

And I saw these foul spirits like frogs coming from the mouth of the dragon, from the mouth of the beast, from the mouth of the false prophet. And the seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple from the throne saying, It is done.

[10 : 25] And there came flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder and a violent earthquake such as had not occurred since people were upon the earth. So violent was that earthquake.

The great sea was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. And God remembered great Babylon and gave her the wine cup of the fury of his wrath. And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found.

And the huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds, dropped from heaven on people until they cursed God for the plague of hail. So fearful was that plague. The word of the Lord, thanks be to God, I guess.

So painful sores, water turns to blood, scorching heat, darkness, massive earthquake, hundred pound hailstones. And twice we read in this passage, they did not repent.

So what do we do with this? So, reminder, we are dealing with a certain kind of genre of literature called apocalyptic literature.

[11 : 27] And this matters because apocalypse means not just the end of the world. It means an unveiling, a revelation, a revealing. And apocalyptic literature followed certain conventions, known conventions.

It was a common genre in what we call Second Temple Jewish period and later. So, the time between the rebuilding of the temple when the Jews came back out of exile to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE.

And this apocalyptic literature was written over and over and over again because even though the Jews had come back from exile and rebuilt a temple, they mourned that the Shekinah glory of God did not return to the Holy of Holies.

The sacrifices had restarted. The priesthood was reestablished. The Holy of Holies was rebuilt. And yet the glory of God had not returned. And so, the Jews were writing this literature about a desire for God's kingdom to be consummated, to arrive.

So, when Jesus shows up saying the kingdom of heaven has arrived, he is saying all those things that you've hoped for the past two, three, four hundred years are coming true in me. So, this type of literature, even though it's bizarre to us, is a very well-known type of literature to a first century, second century Jew.

[12 : 49] Just like we have dystopian literature today, things like Hunger Games and The Handmaid's Tale and all of that, and we don't understand dystopian literature as literally true, but we also understand it as sort of revealing something true about reality.

When you read the Hunger Games and you see the pageantry of kids killing each other so that their section can have food, you understand, well, this isn't literally describing the United States, and yet you recognize some features, right?

Are you with me? Yes. All right. So, it's highly symbolic. It's vivid imagery. It's not meant to be literalized. And it's written from the perspective of powerlessness.

And this is important to understand, that revelation is not written by a person at the top of the privilege pile. It is written from below. It's written from underneath. It's written from the person who's in exile, political exile, because of the empire that's put them on an island in the middle of the sea. And they are writing in solidarity with the rest of their cousins and family in Judaism and Christianity, writing from this perspective of powerlessness.

[14:00] It uses cosmic language for political realities. And it's offering hope that God will vindicate the oppressed. When ancient readers hear about rivers turning to blood and mountains disappearing, they understood this as apocalyptic hyperbole, describing the collapse of unjust systems, not just a weather forecast.

Throughout Revelation, as we've talked about, Babylon is code for Rome. And from an idealist perspective of the book of Revelation, it is about any empire that puts itself in place of God. First century readers would have understood this immediately. Rome, like ancient Babylon, destroyed the Jerusalem temple, carried God's people into exile, and demanded worship of its emperor as divine.

So when we read about bowls of wrath being poured out, we're reading about the hoped-for collapse of Roman imperial violence, and not just God throwing a cosmic temper tantrum. But that still leaves us with some hard questions, because the text is deeply troubling. It depicts God as the source, as the voice from the temple saying, go and do, the source of violent punishment, inflicting suffering on a cosmic global scale.

[15:18] People suffer with sores and heat and darkness and frogs. God forbid frogs. My children love to touch like slugs and frogs and all of that.

I can't do it. Cannot do it. By the way, my favorite little Hebrew tidbit is that, so these seven bowls of wrath, John calls them plagues. And again, we've already talked about the tie to Exodus 15, the Song of Moses.

So there's some parallelism going on here between these seven bowls of wrath and the ten plagues of Egypt. There's some parallels here that are intentional. The darkness, the water turning into blood, and the frogs.

And in the Hebrew telling of the ten plagues, in Hebrew, there is the plural for frogs, or for frog is frog.

There is like sheep and sheep, right? And so you could translate the plague of the frogs as the plague of the frog, which is one of my favorite facts, of just like God sent a giant frog to terrorize Egypt.

[16:19] It's a great image, great image. Okay, so people are suffering. Sores, heat, darkness, giant frog. And this appears to contradict Jesus' own teachings about loving enemies, turning the other cheek, his own practice of non-retaliation, even unto crucifixion, even to the cross.

And for those of us, like myself, committed to non-violent understandings of God, Revelation 15 and 16 is a capital P problem. So what I want to do is I want to offer some theological frameworks that might help.

And these aren't ways to dismiss the text or pretend it doesn't say what it says, but they are tools, lenses, to help us read the text more faithfully. Okay. So theological lens number one would be Christian or sometimes called patristic universalism.

Patristic refers to the early church age of the church fathers and mothers. And those are called the studies of the patristics, like paterfamilia, fathers, family.

Okay. So Christian or patristic universalism was taught by many early church writers, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Isaac of Nineveh. Nineveh, they all taught that ultimately all people and all of creation would be reconciled to God.

[17:39] When Colossians 1 says that God is working to reconcile all things to himself, they believed that that was literal, that was serious. And so this universalism is not because sin doesn't matter.

It's because that God's love is even more stubborn than human resistance. Universal reconciliation is God's ultimate purpose. Any view of hell or judgment is seen as corrective or therapeutic and not retributive.

It's not vindictive. It's not petty revenge. And that all creation would be restored through Christ. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, just as in Adam all died, in Christ all will be made alive.

And Revelation 15.4 fits this perfectly. All nations will come and worship. And so what we're meant to understand from a universalistic perspective is that the statement in Revelation 15.4, all nations will come and worship, is a summary statement.

And yes, all of these bowls of wrath have to happen, but they are disciplinary. They are teaching tools that will eventually bring all people to God. So that's lens number one. Lens number two is non-violent or pacifistic theology.

[18 : 54] We see that God's ultimate power is revealed in Christ on the cross. And so the way that God shows God's power is by absorbing violence rather than returning it.

To love enemies even unto death and refusing to call down legions of angels. So God refuses to coerce and to commit violence.

That the love of God is best described in 1 Corinthians 13, that God is patient and kind and does not keep a record of wrongs and does not insist on their own way.

That Jesus reveals God's true character, that God has always been like Jesus, God will always be like Jesus. We didn't always know this, as Brian Zahn says, but now we do. And that any sort of definition of God's wrath is a consequence of rejecting love.

And that God will allow evil to self-destruct. When we read Revelation 5, back towards the beginning of the book, we discover the line of Judah. We talked about this.

[20 : 01] The line of Judah conquering as the lamb standing as if slain or slaughtered. That the lamb is victorious through vulnerable sacrifice and not violent domination.

Now, admittedly, sometimes non-violent or pacifistic theologies can struggle with justice and the reality of evil. How does a non-violent God deal with oppression and real suffering?

So I want to share some insights from one of my favorite theologians, is an Episcopalian priest in Indianapolis named Matt Tebbe. And he says this about God's wrath, some points.

Number one, God's wrath is God's love opposing that which harms God's creation. I'll read that again. God's wrath is God's love opposing that which harms God's good creation.

I, as a father, can understand this. I love my children. If someone wants to harm my children, I'm going to be upset. And I'm going to oppose whatever harms my children.

[21 : 06] Number two, God is love. God is not wrath. The statement in 1 John that says God is love is an ontological essence. It's the reality of who and what God is.

And wrath does not define God. Rather, we submit wrath underneath God's love. Wrath is a response from God's loving essence. Number three, the object of God's wrath, what is God going to get wrathful about, is that which infects and corrupts creation, never creation itself.

Okay? So God is not going to get wrathful at the thing that God has created. God created the world and called it good. But whatever opposes or wants to harm or infect or corrupt creation, God will get wrathful about.

Just like a doctor cutting out a tumor from a body that is done to heal the body, not to harm it. Wrath is understood as God's love opposing that which harms and corrupts is ultimately seeking to protect and redeem and liberate.

Number five, God isn't insecure. God's renown isn't fragile or contingent. So God's wrath isn't just or primarily for God's sake. God doesn't need anything that only wrath can deliver.

[22 : 28] Rather, number six, God is love. And so God cannot be or do anything other than love.

Love is fierce. Love is strong when it encounters opposition or resistance, the harms that which are those whom are beloved.

Love, a God of love, is not a weak, mambly-pambly kind of God. A God of love is one that is willing to be fierce and strong for what God loves.

We, and Matt Tebbe is talking as white Western Christians, so you can, you know, associate or not associate yourself with that we here. We have trouble with wrath because we have trouble with anger.

We've been taught, I've been taught, it's wrong to be angry. And this is linked to trouble with God being angry. And quick little historical aside here. So around the turn of the 20th century, late

1800s, early 1900s, slavery has been abolished, but you have Jim Crow laws and what historians call the nadir of race relations in the United States.

Lynchings, all of this is happening. And as that's occurring, at the same time, you have the advent of American Christian progressivism, the beginnings of the social justice gospel, where even though we're a non-denominational church, if we were to sort of tie some of the white roots of the justice movement, it would begin in that era.

[23 : 57] There are other justice movements which predate the white movement that you will find in liberation, black communities, brown communities, etc. But for whites, it happened in this 1890s, early 1900s.

And James Cone, a black liberation theologian in the 60s and 70s, is looking back on that era and says it's very, very fascinating to him, Cone says, that the sort of beginning of a theology that says that God cannot be wrathful is happening at the nadir of race relations in the United States.

That you create a God that has no wrath when black people are at some of their most oppressed state in United States history. And it's interesting, Cone says, that white folks would create a theology of a wrathless God at the very moment where they are at the peak of their power.

So we, white Western Christians, have trouble with wrath because we have trouble with anger.

We've been taught it's wrong to be angry. It's linked to trouble with God being angry. Whereas other communities who have been on the underside of power, who have been the oppressed ones and not the oppressors, they need, they worship, they love a God who gets angry because they need a God who's on their side that's going to do something about injustice.

Are you with me? So wrath is often linked with a retributive punishment or torture. And Tebby says, I think this is an unfortunate and misguided interpretation.

[25 : 24] Rather, final point number nine here, God's wrath against that which opposes or harms God's good creation is good news for those who suffer oppression and harm.

It's God's love interceding for them in this oppression. So, some frameworks. Universalism. God is working for the reconciliation of all creation.

Number two, a non-violent theology that still allows for God to actively oppose evil and injustice.

And number three is something called open and relational theology.

The idea that God exists in genuine relationship with creation, that human agency matters, that the future is open and not predetermined, and God works within the freedom of creatures rather than unilaterally or single-handedly controlling outcomes.

So, it means that God's relationship with nature is real and that human freedom is real and that God is always working to persuade rather than coerce and that the future is genuinely open, meaning that the future is not set, the future is not a thing that exists, the future is being co-created by God and creation, creator and creation.

[26 : 37] And so, notice this repeated phrase in chapter 16, verses 9 and 11. They did not repent. The text emphasizes human choice and hardness of heart.

And so, the violence that keeps happening keeps happening because of human hardness of heart, human choice. God doesn't coerce repentance.

He doesn't go in and zap hearts and make them turn. Rather, the bowls reveal what is already true, that the empire is violent and that violence will rebound back onto itself.

So, how do we read these bowl judgments through these lenses? A couple options. Option number one, sort of the natural consequence reading.

What we call wrath might just be the natural consequences of rejecting love. The logical conclusions of injustice playing out. That God's not sending out arbitrary punishment, but allows the consequences of systemic evil to collapse under its own weight.

[27 : 40] And of course, unfortunately, that has collateral damage. Other people will suffer because of evil's selfishness. The bowls might represent God removing divine protection from Rome's violence, allowing oppressive systems to implode.

And what looks like divine violence is actually the withdrawal of God's restraint and human violence consuming itself. Option number two is the idea of prophetic critique.

The bowl judgments are drawing heavily from prophetic oracles from the Hebrew Bible against Babylon and other empires like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. And these texts are employing this hyperbolic cosmic language to announce the downfall of unjust power structures.

And notice the repetition in Revelation 15 and 16. These are the last. This is the end. So it is finished. Notice the resonances at the very last bowl of wrath.

It is finished and there's an earthquake and there's violence, which is exactly what happens when Jesus breathes his last on the cross. It is finished and there was darkness and an earthquake.

[28 : 55] And so is Jesus' death on the cross the absorption of these bowls of wrath. The prophets weren't predicting literal cosmic meltdown, but they were using apocalyptic imagery to announce that empire's days are numbered.

Hallelujah. Option number three is this sort of Exodus echo. The explicit reference to the Song of Moses invites us to read these plagues through the lens of the Exodus narrative.

The bowls echo Egypt's plagues, water to blood, darkness and hail and the frog. But in Exodus, the plagues had a purpose, liberation. They were pressured to let my people go.

They had an instrumental function towards freedom and they were not punishment for punishment's sake. And if you read the Exodus narrative, you see that it's not only Israelites who leave Egypt, Egyptians do as well.

Similarly, these apocalyptic plagues serve a liberative purpose, freeing people from the grip of empire and then God remembered Babylon and poured out the cup of his wrath upon it and everything fled.

[30 : 06] So I think even in a text like this, there is good news. Wrath has an ending. The text opens by emphasizing that these are the last plagues with which the wrath of God is brought to his conclusion.

This is terminal, an end. It is not eternal. So whatever theological work wrath is doing in Revelation, it has a stopping point.

The text itself refuses to make eternal divine wrath. And this matters enormously for how we understand God's character and God's ultimate purposes.

wrath has an ending. Number two, the goal is universal worship. Before the bowls are even poured out, we hear the song proclaiming that all nations will come and worship.

And we will see this in the concluding chapters of Revelation where the city whose gates are never shut, where the kings of the earth are coming in to the city and where the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations.

[31 : 07] And the text places this universalist vision at the very moment when divine judgment is about to fall. And that suggests that somehow through or beyond judgment, universal reconciliation is the end goal, the goal towards which everything is moving.

So again, universalism is not an absence of judgment. It is judgment with a purpose. Number three, this is not revenge porn.

There's a genre of violent apocalyptic fantasy, revenge porn, that revels in the destruction of its enemies. It's the fantasy of seeing those who hurt you hurt, of watching God punish them, of vindication through their torment.

And Revelation could be read that way, I suppose. The angel of the water says, those who shed the blood of the saints are given blood to drink because it's what they deserve. But this is classic retributive justice language.

You get what you deserve, measure for measure. And I want us to believe in something better than that. That even when the text uses retributive language, even when it gives voice to the rage of anger, of victims demanding justice, it bookends it with hope.

[32 : 26] Before the bowls, all nations will come and worship. And after the bowls, the new Jerusalem with open gates. the ark bends towards restoration, not revenge.

This is victim testimony, crying out from within the trauma. It's the rage of those who've been violated, demanding that justice be done. And we can and we should honor that rage, name it as real and valid, while also recognizing that Jesus on the cross offers a different final word.

Father, forgive them. Here's what we can't forget. When we read Revelation 5, we discover that the one who is worthy to open the scrolls, the one who holds the key to understanding any and all of this is a slaughtered lamb, not a conquering warrior, not a violent judge, a lamb standing as if it were slain.

Jesus is our interpretive center. He is the lens through which we read all the scripture, including the violent parts. And that Jesus, that lamb, absorbs violence rather than returns it.

He loves enemies unto death. He refuses to call down legions of angels. And this is the pattern of divine power revealed in Christ. So, when we encounter texts that seem to portray God as violent, we have to read them cruciformly, through the shape of the cross.

[33 : 53] We look for how even those texts might bear witness to the God revealed in Jesus. us. And what we find in Revelation 15 and 16 is this. Even here, God's ultimate purpose is reconciliation, not retribution.

So, what does this mean for us today? We resist empire. Revelation calls us to name and resist oppressive systems. The mark of the beast represents the compromise of worshipping power and wealth and empire.

that might look like nationalism that idolizes the state or consumerism that worships endless growth or white supremacy that makes race ultimate or any system that demands our ultimate allegiance. These chapters encourage faithful resistance even when it's costly. Now, I would be an irresponsible pastor and Star Wars fan if I did not quote Nimick's manifesto from the shore Andor at this moment.

This is what Nimick writes about the empire. There will be times when the struggle seems impossible. I know this already. Alone, unsure, dwarfed by the scale of the enemy.

[35 : 07] Remember this. Freedom is a pure idea. It occurs spontaneously and without instruction. Random acts of insurrection are occurring constantly throughout the galaxy.

There are whole armies and battalions that have no idea they're already enlisted in the cause. And remember that the frontier of the rebellion is everywhere and even the smallest act of insurrection pushes our lines forward.

And then remember this. The imperial need for control is so desperate because it is so unnatural. Tyranny requires constant effort. It breaks.

It leaks. Authority is brittle. Oppression is the mask of fear. Remember that. And know this. The day will come when all these skirmishes and battles these moments of defiance will have flooded the banks of the empire's authority and then there will be one too many.

One single thing will break the siege. Remember this. Try. So, we resist empire. Number two, we hold justice and mercy together.

[36 : 11] We are invited to hold together the biblical affirmation that justice matters. Evil systems must fall. Victims' cries must be heard and we hold that with the biblical hope of universal reconciliation that all nations will worship.

We don't have to choose between justice and mercy. The text itself refuses that choice. We work for justice. We name it to resist evil while trusting that God's ultimate purposes are restorative and not merely punitive.

We proclaim the end of wrath. We refuse theologies that make eternal punishment or make hell a torture chamber of endless divine rage. Revelation 15, one is clear.

These plagues are the last. With them, wrath is ended. And whatever we mean by judgment, it must be held within the biblical horizon of God's ultimate reconciliation of all things.

Which then means we have to live towards that universal hope. We live in light of the vision that all nations will worship. This means that we don't write anyone off. That as Jesus says, we pray and we love our enemies.

[37 : 21] We work for justice without revenge. We trust restoration as God's ultimate purpose. Or we resist despair because we know the ending. Let me close by coming back to the song of Moses and the Lamb.

Before any wrath is poured out, before any judgment falls, there's a song. It's a song of hope. Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God, the Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations.

Lord, who will not fear and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you for your judgments have been revealed. All nations, not some, not only the ones who get it right.

All. This is the song we sing. This is the hope that we hold, that this is the future that we must trust and live ourselves into. Not a future of endless torment on a God of eternal wrath, not a cosmic revenge fantasy, but a future where justice is done, where evil is exposed and collapses, where victims find vindication, and yet, somehow, mysteriously, through the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, all come and worship.

The good news of Revelation 15 and 16 is this. Wrath ends. Worship is eternal and God's stubborn, relentless love wins in the end.
[38 : 48] Amen.