

Try Church - Songs of Freedom

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Preacher: Darren Jackson

[0 : 00] Thank you.

They are actual things in the world opposed to human thriving and opposed to the works of God. When Revelation talks of things like evil, it is not a fantasy or an abstract idea or concept.

It is real. There's something beyond us that is a real force that isn't just, yeah, the fairy tales of little demons, but something in the world that God comes and deals with and takes on.

It is opposed to the ways of God. And John, the raider of Revelation, is writing to encourage and reassure at that time a struggling group of believers.

He is addressing real people for genuine help in difficult times as they live as a minority group under the Roman Empire. And I think when we see the realities, what we're seeing in here is a big victory parade, but the day-to-day life of a lot of these people would have not felt like that.

[1 : 25] At this time, the Roman Empire would have conquered the known world. And I don't know how much you know about the Roman Empire, even if you've briefly seen the Gladiator movies. But one of the things that was core to the Roman Empire was this idea that Caesar didn't just see himself as a great guy, but that he was a deity.

He was a god of some form. Caesar as Lord would be something to be claimed. And so those who complied with Rome and its power would gain citizenship, while those who opposed it wouldn't just face conquest, but death.

And these communities of new believers would have faced daily propaganda proclaiming the Roman Emperor as a god. Every aspect of their life was bombarded with declarations of Caesar's greatness.

So one of the Caesars, the Domitian, who would have been around in the 80s, AD, he apparently had a choir that would follow him saying, you are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.

Or Caesar is the son of God, sent to bring peace and prosperity. Now for those who refused to accept that, reality was far from peaceful.

[2 : 36] It was a time of devastation, oppression, and evil seemed to flourish. Now imagine you're one of the people of this new community of believers of Jesus, and you work in the marketplace in somewhere like Ephesus.

So to buy and trade goods, you must offer incense or something to acknowledge Caesar's authority. To prove that you'd acknowledged Caesar's authority, you might have got a stamp or a mark on your hand or face to show that you'd paid worship to Caesar.

And refusal to do so wouldn't have just meant you couldn't trade, but would have come persecution on your life potentially. Now Caesar claiming divine status, and in Jewish tradition, a certain in such a thing would be considered in the Old Testament akin to a beast.

So offering incest, incest, oh my goodness, that's an incense, would have been taking the mark of the beast. So you'd have done something to show that you'd worshipped Caesar as God and would have got the mark of the beast.

But you are now part of this new movement which was slowly being considered as anti-empire, proclaiming Jesus is Lord. What do you do? Do you comply?

[3 : 47] Do you offer worship to another God who you know not to be a God? And if you did so, how would you sell to provide for your family? These were the dilemmas faced by the early followers of Jesus under the oppressive empire, the beast and the evil behind such things.

Now the followers of Jesus had a different vision for the world, rooted in their belief that Jesus was Lord. They believed that the world wasn't improved through violence and oppression or wealth, but the sacrificial nature of Jesus himself, who offers himself to give us new life through the forgiveness of sins.

Everything Jesus embodied was the antithesis of Caesar. Like if you got caught with this letter in the first century, this is like treason language, you would have been put to death. So daily you would have the question, which system works?

Which represents the path to life? The empire that seems to be in control in front of you? Or the kingdom to come? The way of Caesar? Or the way of Jesus? And from the perspective of this window into reality, the beast is conquered.

And the people of God, instead of fear, are singing a song. And that the Lord is not just the source of truth, but he's a source of justice as well. It's as if John is saying to the reader, and therefore to us tonight, don't fall for the lie.

[5 : 08] Don't be seduced by the power of the empire in front of you. There's a better way. Jesus is Lord. And so as we move into the next section of the letter, the song they sing is a song about the second point.

Remember where you came from. So in chapter 15, we're told a bit, in verses 3 to 8, we're told a bit about what this celebration looks like. They sing a song celebrating God's justice, holiness, and power.

In verse 3, they sing the song of Moses. Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord, all God almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name?

For you alone are holy. All the nations will come and worship before you, and your righteous acts have been revealed. Now again, as Alex said, there's loads of Old Testament imagery, and like the rest of the chapter goes on to talk about plagues.

There'd be two words that jump out to you from the Old Testament, which would be Moses and plagues. Both that language has taken us right back into the Exodus story. And in the Exodus story, in chapter 15, where the people of God are being pursued and persecuted by another empire at that time, Egypt.

[6 : 18] And as they go through the Red Sea, in chapter 15, Moses and his sisters stop, and the whole nation sing a song. They sing a song of freedom about the God who has rescued them and taken them out of slavery.

The people sing this song about a God who saw injustice and came and dealt with it. And he came and dealt with it by subjecting Egypt to plagues, to disrupt them, but more than just to disrupt them, to enact his justice, to rescue his people, and to show, if nothing else, that the gods and power of Egypt are nothing in comparison to who he is and what our God is like.

So if you're writing to a group of people, which is in the immediate context of the group of people this would have been originally read to, who are oppressed, and you start telling them a story about freedom and justice and who is really in charge, and you use all the same images that the Exodus story uses, what are you trying to say?

I guess if nothing else, you're trying to say to the people of God, we've been here before, and this empire, and this persecution, and this challenge is no more of a threat to God than anything else that has come before.

It is no smaller thing for God to deal with the oppressive power structures, cultures of temptations right in front of the people. It's a call for them to remember their story of what it means to be God's people.

[7 : 45] You were enslaved, but you're now free. You were in darkness, and you were in light. And these times may seem dark. We have a God who has dealt with this thing before, and not just in the immediate context, but beyond that, in the evil behind these things.

The Exodus story is not just a story for the past. It's a story for them today, and it's a story for us to do, because it's a story of God's people, about people who come from a long line of needing to be set free, enslaved individuals who need to be set free all the time.

And that every time and every place in history, the people of God, this side of the new creation, will find themselves feeling like there is more powerful things in front of them than their God.

And he's reminding them that is not true of Rome. It is not true of Egypt. It's not true of ultimately evil and death itself. Remember your story and the one who saved you.

Because we all live with various forms of slavery, from self-imposed burdens to addictions or patterns of behavior you know harm you or others, or the things that are not in line with how God has made us to flourish as outlined in his law.

[8 : 58] And this freedom that God offers has nothing to do with what appears to be in control in front of you. None of the original readers of this letter would have lived to see the downfall of the Roman Empire.

But from this view of reality, from Jesus' perspective, the beast has been defeated. So instead, sing of the reality of who God is, as opposed to living in fear. These promises of bowls and plagues remind us of God's saving work in history, of God's coming justice.

It's about reconnection with God in his presence. But we are told that cannot happen fully until the seven plagues are completed. So in verse 8 of chapter 15, it says, And the temple was filled with smoke, so the temple the dwelling place of God, 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. So this plague, this judgment, is necessary for the reconnection of God and his people.

So for the next few minutes, we're going to look at why that is the case. And our next point is about wrath being poured out. So as we get into chapter 16, we see the angels pouring out the seven bowls of God's wrath.

[10 : 15] Now, I don't know about you, but when we come to think about subjects like God's wrath, whether you've been a Christian your whole life or this is maybe your first time in church, we can have many confusing and often unbiblical ideas in our minds as to what that means.

And so there's two things I think that are really, there's many things, but two for me tonight that I think you see in this passage that are really important to hold in your mind when we're thinking about this subject. Firstly, it's the character of the God behind the wrath.

So when we think of God's wrath, and actually if you were here this morning, I think I'd encourage you to listen to the morning service as Martin was talking about the nature of forgiveness and anger. But we can sometimes think of God's wrath and anger like rage.

But God's anger is not like malice or some sort of vindictive, I'm going to get my own back and all you lot for not behaving from God. It's a revelation, as Alex was telling us, of his holiness. Such a powerful force, it's central to his character, that in his presence, sin and pain and destruction cannot exist.

They cannot be present. Now this might be challenging for us to think about God in this way, but it offers deep comfort to the many people who've endured great evil or injustice in their life.

[11 : 30] Because if you think about it, if God never gets angry, how can you believe he loves? If you never experience anger, by definition, you don't love anything.

Because when you love something and you see it threatened, you feel anger. If you remain indifferent, that means you don't care. God cares about his holiness and his people.

I'm going to read this quote by Rebecca Pippert, which I may have read to some of this context before. I don't know if you can read that, but I'll read it anyway. Think of how we feel when we see someone we love hurt by foolish actions or relationships.

Do we tolerate them like strangers? No. Anger isn't love's opposite. Hate is. And the final form of hate is indifference. A loving father is angry at his son for drinking, lying, and betraying him.

If I, a flawed woman, can feel this much pain and anger, how much more a morally perfect God who has made them. And she's just drawing on the reality that when we see people we love doing things that are destructive, to think, oh, we don't care, it doesn't matter, is not the way of love.

[12 : 45] God's wrath isn't like a flying off the handle, like, I don't know if you've ever watched the John Wick films where he just gets vengeance and goes around to start killing things. True love, true power, the love of God and the holiness God combined cannot and will not tolerate sin and injustice in the world.

His righteous anger is a commitment to his justice and his righteousness at the same time. And so whilst it's very difficult language, and any time we talk about the judgment of God, it is not supposed to be an easy subject, I don't know if you're supposed to read it and be like, oh, that's great.

It's supposed to provoke us, but it's provoking us about the realities of the power of sin, but also God's commitment to doing something about it. And also in chapter 16, we see that the perspective we're looking at reality is not a human-level perspective.

It's a God-level perspective. So in verse 1 of chapter 16, we're in the temple. Verse 5 of chapter 15 says the sanctuary of the tent of witness. And again, this is Old Testament imagery.

It's the place where the presence and moral law of God resides. It's the dwelling place of God's holiness. And God's holiness is an integral part of his character. The way I often think of it, and like, I think when you get some of these analogies, they're always inherently a bit clunky.

[14 : 04] But for me, it's a bit like the danger of getting too close to the sun. Even from earth, we can feel the negative effects of the sun, can't we? Yet we're drawn to it because it's beauty and light and the life it gives.

But as humans, the closer we get, we cannot tolerate his presence because it's not about us. Actually, the purity of that power would consume us. Now, the challenge is probably for most people in the world, our intuitive understanding of justice is essentially we compare the best people to the worst people, leading 90% of the world to think they're good people, and usually we are all in that 90%.

But everything changes rapidly when you compare that to a holy God. It exposes the absurdity of comparing ourselves and the notion that some people are less or more deserving of judgment.

It just disintegrates when you're comparing it to this thing. Now, again, while it's a struggling idea, I think if you really push into the convictions of, say, atheist thinking, they would arrive at a similar conclusion.

Over Christmas, I read the book Sapiens. I don't know if you've ever seen it. It's that book. It's constantly in Waterstones. It's that book's interesting, but also a bit boring. When I say it already, I actually listened to it walking back and forward to Celtic Games.

[15 : 18] I might be the only person listening to evolutionary biology books walking to Celtic Park. But he says in this book, Culture tends to argue that it forbids only that which is unnatural.

But from a biological perspective, nothing is unnatural. Whatever is possible is by definition also natural. A truly unnatural behavior. One that goes against the laws of nature simply cannot exist.

So it would need no prohibition. So what he's saying there is, if life lacks inherent meaning, and we're purely biological beings driven by desire, then things like equality, fairness, and justice are meaningless.

Good and evil are absurd when compared with the universe's emptiness. There's no good people. There's no bad people. If it happens, it happens. You shouldn't care. Now, most of us know instinctively that is not within our hearts.

It does not sit right at best. The scriptures, however, attest to something massively more fuller and beautiful at the center of reality. It's supposed to nothing. There is power and goodness and personality.

[16 : 27] This is ultimate reality. A reality in which God pursues us in order to reclaim a people for himself and for the sake of his own glory. This is, therefore, far much more bigger and more serious than the confused picture we might sometimes have when we think about sin and judgment.

That God is constantly on the lookout in a nitpicky way for certain bad behavior, threatening hell if you get too many things wrong. In the gospel, sin is always about who and what you worship and who or what is at the center of our lives.

And the heart of sin is that we reject God. And you actually see that in this chapter. It's in chapter 16. When God's, when the wrath is being poured out and the people are experiencing the consequences of rebellion from him, you do not see a picture of people then repenting and people saying, save us.

If anything, you see in verses 9, in verses 11, in verse 21, people who then start to accuse God. So verse 21, just for example.

And from the huge hailstones, each weighing about 40 kilograms, filmed the people and they cursed God on account of the plague of hell because the plague was so terrible.

[17 : 42] This is not a group of people crying out for help. It's a people doubling down on what they worship and it is not God. In Romans 1, 18 to 20, it tells us this.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all goodness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by the wicked. Suppression is an action, it's a choice, a decision. For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen being understood from what has been made so that people are without excuse.

Romans is telling us that we know in our hearts there is a sense of right and wrong, but we choose to ignore it. The challenge with sin is if sin was boring, we wouldn't do it, but we do it because we love it.

And the kind of things we love is a form of worship. John, in his gospel, puts it like this. The light has come into the world, but the people love the darkness more than the light.

So they curse God, even though he has conquered the dragon and the beast. He brings light, yet the people prefer darkness. He offers real life, but they choose something that leads to spiritual death instead.

[18 : 56] He cares about the poor and the marginalized, but he's often accused of being blamed for oppression. He grants freedom. He's often accused of slavery. He bestows upon us the good gifts of sex, community, money, and play, yet we mock and belittle him for his laws and instructions.

So the Bible often uses the metaphor of slavery to describe sin because it distorts humanity and leads to a fate of evil. Choosing darkness over light is like joining the dragon and the beast in their inevitable future.

God's wrath is not cruel or arbitrary, but a necessary response to the sin of rejection. And as Christians, we must grapple with that message, not with superiority or pleasure or some sort of smugness, but with compassion for whenever we find or see someone trapped in slavery, in darkness.

Remembering that that was our story too. There's a scene in John's gospel where Jesus is in argument with the Pharisees, where they say we were never slaves to anyone. They'd forgotten their story. We can't remain neutral or silent though because of that whenever we see this played out in the reality of the world.

So what do we do with that? Well, briefly, just to end, we know the promise that this two chapters tells us that wrath is finished. So 15 begins with, and with them the wrath of God was finished.

[20 : 21] And chapter 16, verse 17, we read, The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne saying, It is done.

So in both these chapters, we have an announcement that the wrath of God has an end point. John tells us in one of his letters, God has love as a complete part of his character. It's an eternal aspect of him.

But his wrath has a finite duration. The reality of sin in our lives creates a fracture in our world, a fracture that leaves us relationally broken in ourselves and with God who created us.

And as we were hearing this morning, anger always leaves people relationally separated, doesn't it? For reconciliation to happen then, something has to happen to that anger. Vengeance just turns the dial up on anger.

But pretending there's nothing to be angry at, doesn't it? Have you ever been really angry and just tried to pretend you're not angry? That doesn't work either. It actually would dismiss the reality of the situation in front of you. God does neither.

[21 : 25] He absorbs the anger in Christ. It is done would have been as significant to John as it is to anybody who's read the New Testament. In John chapter 19, John records the scene of Jesus on the cross.

Later, knowing that everything had now been finished and so the scriptures would be fulfilled, Jesus said, I am thirsty. A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked the sponge in it, put the sponge on the stalk of the plant and lifted it to Jesus' lips.

And when he had received the drink, Jesus said, it is finished. And with that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. On the cross, as John is telling us, Jesus takes and absorbs God's wrath.

It is there Jesus secures forgiveness for the sin that separates us from him and causes our hearts to go off in many other directions to worship something else. The selfish ways that we cause harm to ourselves and to one another regularly and daily.

And not just to leave us neutral, but so he can restore us and make us a new people. The people who join in the victory song of the beginning of the chapter. This means if you're a follower of Jesus, God's wrath has been dealt with and absorbed by Christ on the cross.

[22 : 46] So as a disciple of Christ, you are no longer defined by wrath, but now by mercy. This judgment is no longer ours. Forgiveness is now ours.

Redemption is now ours. New life is now ours. For me, one of the most challenging, as somebody who works in ministry, one of the most challenging things I think I've seen over the past 10 years is how many Christians live as though they are still under wrath.

When the Bible's message is clear that under Christ, your new identity is one of mercy. Wouldn't it be amazing if we could embrace the reality that the power and the destructiveness of how our sin takes us is not just diverted off and swept under the rug, but is absorbed and taken by Jesus, and then he gives us new life through his spirit.

The wrath is gone. It is being defeated because Jesus takes it. It doesn't pretend it doesn't exist. And in Christ, therefore, as followers of Jesus, the exit story of being saved out of darkness into light means the refusal of some, for some people, the idea that God is somehow perpetually angry at you all the time is not the identity of the believer of Christ.

You might get disciplined because he's a good father. You will still sin and still make mistakes. And we don't excuse any of that away. If you somehow read the book of Revelation and think, oh, well, sin's not that important anymore, you're completely misreading the book.

[24 : 11] But the Scriptures are clear. For the follower of Christ, it is finished. You're under mercy. So as we finish, we try to remember these points, that Revelation condemns evil and oppression in all its forms.

Calling us to reign strong and hopeful, knowing God's victory, is stronger than anything you might face. It speaks of life with Christ and his victory, even if our physical lives in the present are threatened.

But that is only possible because God will deal with anger through his wrath at the injustice and suffering in the world, which doesn't just happen out there, happens in here too.

So when Jesus returns, it says in chapter 16, the mountains will tremble, the elements will dissolve, and the earth will melt. This is God's holiness relentlessly pursuing and decimating anything touched and distorted by sin.

God's wrath is rooted in his holiness and his glory. This isn't rage, but purity and beauty and justice. And understanding this is the essence of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

[25 : 16] It transforms everything. So as followers of Jesus, the invitation is to be, not to make this all go away yourself, but that he takes that and that we know that God's wrath has been absorbed by Christ on the cross, liberating us to experience his mercy and holding that out as a message of hope to everyone because it's finished.

I'm going to pray and then the band will come back up. Father, we thank you that your fullness of power and the fullness of your love are not somehow at war with one another, but they are perfectly demonstrated in your commitment to your glory and to your justice.

yet the amazing good news is that you put yourself in the center of that story and deal with it as well. Help us to live that daily as our reality and help us to know if we've been wandering from that, that your invitation is not to double down and worship things that can never satisfy us, but will ultimately lead to destruction, but instead to return to you for the gift of new life.

I ask that in Jesus' name. Amen.