

Revelation 15:1-16:21 // Songs of Freedom

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. And John, the rewriter 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 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 dominician 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 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 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 such a thing would be considered in the Old Testament akin to a beast so offering incest incest oh my goodness that's a incense uh would have been taking the mark of the beast so you'd have done something to show that you'd worshiped Caesar as god and we've got the mark of the beast but you are now part of this new movement which considered was slowly being considered as anti-empire proclaiming

Jesus is lord what do you do do you comply 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 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

[5:32] 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 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 if 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 is taking 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 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 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's no smaller thing for God to deal with the oppressive power structures cultures of temptations right in front of the people it's called for them to remember their story of what it means to be God's people you were enslaved but you're now free you were in darkness and you're in light and these times may some seem dark we have a God who has dealt with this thing before and not just I mean 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 in 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 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 are not in line with how

God has made us to flourish as outlined in his law 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's perspective the beast has been defeated so instead sing of the reality of who God is supposed to living in fear these promises of bowls and plagues remind us of God's saving work in history and 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 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 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 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 I think you see in this passage they're 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're 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 his 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 that offers deep comfort to many people who've endured great evil or injustice in their life 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 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 Piper which I might 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 God's wrath isn't like a flying off the handle like I don't know if you've already watched the John Wick films where he just gets vengeance as he 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 anytime we talk about the judgment of God it is not supposed to be an easy subject I don't know if it's supposed to read 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 is 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 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 us 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% 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 *um sapiens* I don't know if you've ever seen it is that book is constantly waterstones that *um* looks interesting but also a bit boring *um* I say I read it I actually listened to it walking back and forward to Celtic games 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 indeed 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 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 this is ultimate reality a reality in which God pursues us in order to reclaim 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 they're 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 and verses 11 and verse 21 people who then start to accuse God so verse 21 just for example and from the huge hail stones each weighing about 40 kilograms film the people and they cursed God on account of the plague of hail because the plague was so terrible 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 suppressions and actions 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 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 and 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 he cares about the poor and the marginalized he's often accused of blaming for 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

[19:11] 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 pleasure of 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 and verse 6 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 is love that's a complete part of his character it's an eternal aspect of him but his wrath has a finite duration the reality of our 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 as we're 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 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 he absorbs the anger in Christ it is done would have

been a 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'm thirsty a jar of wine vinegar was there so they soaked the sponge in it put the sponge on the stalk of his plant and lifted it to Jesus's 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 for 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 as neutral but so he can restore us and make us a new people the people who join in 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 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 somebody 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 like 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 is absorbed and taken by Jesus and then he gives us new life through his spirit that wrath is gone it is being defeated because Jesus takes 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 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 it transforms everything so as followers of Jesus the invitation to 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 and we 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 that's that in Jesus name amen and one two three one two and