

The Seven Bowls
(Sermon 23 – Rev. 15 & 16)
3.23.35

Please turn in your Bibles to Revelation 15.

We know that God’s timing is perfect. His will is determined, and in just the right time, everything that God wills comes to pass. Because of this, at least from our perspective, there is often a gap between a promise and reality. Whether it’s prayers that haven’t been answered, or promises of God we haven’t seen come to pass, we can be tempted to say, “How long, O Lord?”

This waiting, this gap between the promise and reality can tempt us to frustration, to unbelief. But it’s important to remember that God’s delays are also an expression of God’s mercy, especially when it comes to the end times. God has promised to judge those who reject Christ. But thankfully, God has not yet poured out that judgment. He is patient. He is longsuffering. He is merciful. But He will not delay forever. Deliverance for His people, and judgment of His enemies will soon come.

That’s what we’re being reminded of in these chapters in Revelation. Jesus is giving the Apostle John a series of visions to illustrate and represent the final judgment of God from different angles. These visions are not in chronological order, but like instant replays in a football game, John is shown the replay of God’s judgment from three different perspectives.

First, in ch. 4-7 it was seals on a scroll. Then in ch. 8-11 it was trumpets being blown. And today, in ch.15-16, we will see a third replay – this time with the metaphor of bowls being poured out.

John sees God’s judgment first from the vantage point of heaven in ch. 15. Then in ch. 16 this same event is shown from the vantage point of earth.

These two chapters go together, so we will unpack them together. But let’s start by reading Rev. 15, then we’ll pray and ask for God’s help...

Revelation 15:1-8

[1] Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished. [2] And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and

its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.

[3] And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! [4] Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy.

All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." [5] After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, [6] and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests.

[7] And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever, [8] and the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

(PRAY)

PROP: God is moving all of history toward the ultimate deliverance of His people.

From the moment God created Adam and Eve in the garden, all the way to you and me, God has ordained from the beginning a beautiful deliverance of His people, an ultimate rescue. Not just from earthly enemies and oppression, but a rescue from death itself. So no matter what is going on around us, God is always at work in us and for us, moving us ever closer to that "one day" when sin will be no more, and we'll be with the Lord forever.

So with that let's look from heaven's perspective at these 7 plagues of God's final judgment...

I. The Seven Plagues (Heaven's Perspective)

John says this judgment of God is "the last" and "the wrath of God is finished". We are going to see that again in coming verses.

And here we see the redeemed of the Lord, lined up as if it is a parade route. And they had their harps, getting ready to sing God's praises.

[3] And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!"

[4] Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."

This is the first of many connections that we will see between this final judgment of God in Revelation, and the Book of Exodus. Back in Exodus 15, when God freed ancient Israel from slavery in Egypt, God parted the Red Sea so Israel could get away from Pharaoh's army. Then, on the bank of the sea, they broke out tambourines and musical instruments, singing and praising God for the deliverance of His people, and for His judgment upon their enemies.

And here in Rev. 15, we see a similar picture, with God's people standing on the shores of the glassy sea in heaven, singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb.

These songs of celebration go perfectly together, because in Exodus, God uses Moses to deliver His people from slavery of Egypt, and conquer His enemies. In Revelation, Jesus is the better Moses who delivers His people from the slavery of sin and conquers all of God's enemies.

These similarities are no coincidence. They are meant to show us that God's plan of rescue, His plan of redemption for His people has been the same from the beginning, now perfectly fulfilled in Jesus.

But what about the previous chapters that said the beast overcame the Christians, even killing many. That was an earthly perspective. But from a heavenly perspective, God's people have overcome. From the heavenly perspective, although some Christians are martyred, they have not been defeated. But they have overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony.

We need a heavenly perspective, especially in the trials of this life. When you feel alone, a heavenly perspective reminds you that you have a friend that sticks closer than a brother. When it seems all is lost, a heavenly perspective reminds us that God knows how to make a way where there is

no way. When it feels like you're defeated, when your strength is gone, that's when you realize the unending, overflowing, undefeated strength of the Savior lives in you, sustaining you, keeping you, strengthening you for the battle, knowing that greater is He that is you than he that is in the world!

And what a timely reminder for those 7 churches of Asia Minor John was writing to. They were in the middle of their own persecution from Rome. Seeing people from their own congregation martyred. God is reminding them, while it may look like their enemies have the upper hand, God has already won the victory, and those who have placed their hope in Christ, they share in that victory.

We need a heavenly perspective, not an earthly one – seeing our lives and our circumstances from an eternal perspective, knowing there is a Sovereign God who has a plan, and He is working all things out for the good.

But too many people live their lives blind to this. Not seeing God's goodness. Not trusting in what Jesus has done for them. Rejecting God's grace. Because their eyes are blind and their hearts are darkened.

That was the condition of those on earth at the time of these plagues of God's judgment. They had seen miraculous things. They had heard the gospel repeatedly. But they would not repent.

Dennis Johnson: "Neither the backwash of sin's bitter aftertaste nor the first fruits of its lethal harvest can soften hearts of stone. Only God's Spirit, applying the gospel of grace, can turn stony hearts into hearts of tender flesh..."

...but the bowls show us a moment in time when the Spirit's gentle and irresistible wooing is complete, the Son's sheep have been gathered, and the Father's patience has waited long enough."

And while it would be tempting to point at these people and ask, "What is wrong with them? Why can't they see?", we should first ask the question of our own hearts. All that we have seen, all that God has revealed to us, why do we still struggle with doubt and unbelief? Why do we still struggle to trust God's plan for my life?

We don't need to see or hear anything else to honor and worship God with our whole hearts.

After this song of praise in heaven, John now draws our attention again to these 7 angels...

[5] After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, [6] and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests.

[7] And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever, [8] and the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

These 7 angels come out of the “tent of witness”, the heavenly picture of the earthly Tabernacle, another connection to Moses & Exodus. And they bring out of the heavenly Tabernacle 7 bowls full of God’s wrath.

Notice two things in v. 8. First, “No one could enter the sanctuary”. Another echo of the Tabernacle of Moses. During the Exodus, the Bible says that *“the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter” because of the presence of God*” (Exodus 40:34-35).

Also notice at the end of v.8, the repeated emphasis on this being “finished”, another reminder that there will eventually be an end to God’s wrath.

(Transition): That’s the heavenly perspective of these events. Now, as we move into ch. 16, John’s attention is turned from heaven to earth, and the plagues of the 7 bowls of God’s wrath being poured out on the enemies of God...

II. The Seven Bowls (Earth’s Perspective)

[16:1] Then 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.”

For the believer, Christ took that punishment for us on the cross. But the Bible tells us, for those who have rejected Christ, that wrath is being stored up (Rom 2:5). These bowls represent the wrath that has been stored up, bowls which are about to be emptied upon the earth as the final judgment of God.

We've seen this imagery of bowls already in Revelation. Back in ch. 5, John describes "the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (Rev. 5:8).

What was first described as a symbol of worship in heaven is now being contrasted as a symbol of judgment upon the wicked.

[2] So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.

Notice more connection to Moses and the Exodus. This first bowl of God's wrath produced boils and painful sores on God's enemies, reflecting the 6th plague of Egypt.

[3] The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea. [4] The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood.

We've seen this before as well. Turning the water to blood was the 1st plague of Egypt, as well as with the 2nd and 3rd trumpets in Revelation.

Then, in the midst of these first few bowls of judgment being poured out, we see another song - heaven praising God for His righteousness and justice...

[5] And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, "Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. [6] For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!"

[7] And I heard the altar saying, "Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!"

Back in ch. 6, the souls of the martyrs in heaven are waiting for God to judge those who have persecuted the church through the ages. They cry out to God, "How long O Lord?" And God tells them to wait just a little while longer.

Now they don't have to wait any longer. As promised, God brings to pass His judgment on all those who persecuted the Church.

[8] The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. [9] They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory.

With this bowl, we are reminded of a promise of protection for God's people back in Rev. 7, "*They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.*" (Revelation 7:16)

God's wrath being poured out is for the unbeliever, not for God's people. But still, the wicked do not repent.

[10] The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish [11] and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds.

Again, we find an echo of the Exodus, in that darkness was also the 9th plague of Egypt.

[12] The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east.

This plague or bowl is not just a drought. In the OT, the river Euphrates was also a geographical barrier between Israel and many of her enemies. The drying up of this river is symbolic of removing those barriers, to make a path for the enemies of God to gather for the final battle against Him.

God's enemies see this as their chance. Barriers are removed, and they gather to do battle with God. And they pridefully, foolishly run toward their own destruction.

[13] And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs.

Another connection to the Exodus - frogs covering the land, that was the 2nd plague of Egypt. But here in Revelation, these are not literal frogs. They were something worse...

[14] For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty.

These frogs “coming out of the mouth” of the unholy trinity represent the demonic deception with which they have fooled the world into worshipping the beast. Why else would mortal man gather to do battle with Almighty God, actually thinking for a moment that the creation can defeat their Creator? To actually believe that prideful, weak, finite man could even come close to threatening the all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful God of the universe? The only explanation is abject blindness and deception.

This reminds us of the incredible gift it is that God saved us. We were once deceived. We were once blind and dead in our sins. If you’re saved today, it’s not because of you. It’s because of God. The only way we can see the cross is that God remove our blindness, remove the deception from our hearts. Otherwise, we would be gathering with the blind and deceived, trying to war against God.

[15] (“Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!”)

When Jesus says of His return that He will come “like a thief”, this does not mean it will be a secret return, for the Bible says every eye will see Him.

Instead, it means that His coming will be sudden and unexpected, while the world is spiritually sleeping. That’s why it is followed by the command for the church to “stay awake”. Stay alert, stay vigilant, so that you may be ready for the attacks of the enemy, AND so that you may be prepared for the Lord’s return.

So, God’s judgment is being poured out, but still the nations of the earth do not repent. Instead, they gather together to do battle with God...

[16] And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

Ah, now our ears perk up. We recognize that name “Armageddon”. No, not the bad Ben Affleck movie from the 90’s. This is the place of the final battle between good and evil, between God and the devil.

More will be revealed about this battle in coming chapters. But here, John simply mentions the location.

So what is the significance of “Armageddon”? It was also the location of some ancient battles in the Bible. In Hebrew, it actually means “mount of Megiddo”. Megiddo is an actual place in Palestine, but it doesn’t have any hills big enough to be considered a mountain.

Like so many other things in Revelation, it should be taken as a symbol.

The word “Armageddon” has a Greek translation which means “the Mount of Assembly”. Much like we saw back in Rev. 14, there is a heavenly Mount Zion where Jesus was standing, surrounded by all the Redeemed.

“Armageddon” is the opposite – it’s the symbolic location used to describe the earthly gathering of all of God’s enemies, assembled together in sinful allegiance against the Lord.

[17] The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, “It is done!”

Now this is the 3rd time in these chapters that the completion of God’s wrath is communicated. It is done. “It...is...finished.”

In fact, those three words are the bookends marking the last days. From the time Jesus hung on the cross, and breathing His last, He uttered “It is finished”, meaning all that the Father had ordained for Jesus to do, all that was required for the curse of Adam’s sin to be reversed, all that was needed to fulfill God’s just wrath upon the sins of His people so they could be reconciled to Him, all that Jesus was called to do in living a perfect sinless life and dying a sacrificial death on our behalf, it was finished.

And now, in Rev. 16, the final proclamation, with the last angel pouring out the last bowl of God’s wrath, a loud voice from heaven proclaims those same words – “It is done, it is finished”. But this time, what is done was not only the redemption of all who trust in Christ. Now, what is done is also the final judgment of all who reject Christ.

[18] And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake.

[19] The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath.

This final earthquake, like the one we saw with the 6th seal being broken, is the final act of God's wrath, the result of the final bowl of His wrath poured out on those who reject Christ.

"Babylon the great" is not just one city, but represents all the wicked cities and nations, all the sinful population of mankind. It is broken into pieces. The full cup of God's wrath is poured out.

***[20] And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found.
[21] And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people; and they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe.***

Islands and mountains disappear, they are flattened by this global earthquake and by massive hailstones falling from the sky, (again a connection to the 7th plague of Egypt when God sent burning hail upon the land).

But instead of burning hail like in the Exodus, this hail is simply massive, falling down in 100-pound chunks. Just for comparison, the largest hailstone ever discovered in America was about the size of a cantaloupe and weighed only 2 pounds. Now, I say "only" two pounds, but if a 2-pound ball of ice fell from the sky, whatever it landed on would suffer major damage.

So the size of a hailstone that weighed 100 pounds would have the diameter of an oversized truck tire, falling from the sky at around 300 mph. It's easy to see how back in ch. 14 that people who rose up against God were crushed like grapes. Hundred-pound hailstones would definitely do that.

I don't get into those details just for morbid curiosity. But these kinds of descriptions are meant to sober us. We need to stop and consider how horrific, how fearful the wrath of God is. Not only are the wicked going to be destroyed, but God is doing demolition on the whole planet. Mountains flattened. Islands disappearing. But why is God destroying the earth?

You have to tear down the old to make way for the new. God is going to make a new earth.

[10] But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed...

[13] But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. ~ 2 Peter 3:10,13

And that's what we have to look forward to, when God brings an end to all things He will bring heaven down to earth, and will set up His eternal kingdom here. And we will be with Him forever.

Conclusion

God is moving all of history toward the ultimate deliverance of His people.

For those who trust in Christ, your deliverance first came when Jesus said, "It is finished" on the cross. He completed the work. Your salvation from sin is secure, and your adoption into the family of God is forever.

So that, you can know for sure that when that final angel says for the last time, "It is finished", all of God's judgment is complete, all sin is done away with, all of Hell is defeated, when we know all of that is finished, it means that your eternal joys will have just begun.

(Let's Pray)