

Seven Bowls of Wrath

When you think about God, which of His attributes first come to mind?

For most of us, His love, His mercy and grace, His goodness or faithfulness may come to mind. I would guess that very few people immediately think about wrath when they think about God, unless they're reading the Old Testament. In fact, some people claim that the wrathful God of the Old Testament is different than the loving God of the New Testament. They try to divide God into two parts so they don't have to deal with His wrath. We don't often hear sermons about the wrath of God or read Bible studies on the subject. It's a subject that most of us avoid because it makes us uncomfortable.

However, in tonight's lesson, we'll be getting a good look at God's wrath as it's poured out upon the earth, upon those who dwell in the earth, and upon the beast. We'll also see that, for those of us in Christ, God's wrath is a thing to be celebrated.

The Celebration of the Conquerors (15:1-4)

At the beginning of chapter 15, John sees another sign or vision, this time of seven angels with seven plagues.

When you hear the word "plagues" what comes to mind?

That word "plagues" should immediately take us back to Egypt when God sent the plagues against Pharaoh to convince him to let His people go. In fact, we're going to see a lot of similarity between this passage and what took place in Egypt, just as we did when we studied the seven trumpets. This vision is very similar to that of the trumpets, only in the vision of the trumpets, the judgment was only allowed to affect a fraction of the earth, whereas the judgments in this vision are going to be against the whole earth.

We also see that this series of judgment is to be the last, "for with them the wrath of God is finished" (v.1). Some take that to mean that each of the visions—the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls—are describing separate periods of judgment, with this being the final and most severe, occurring immediately before the return of Christ.

However, as we've discussed previously, each of the visions is describing the same set of judgments, but each vision has a different focus. With the visions of the seals, the focus was on those in Christ who were sealed for protection from the judgments described. The vision of the trumpets was meant to serve as a warning for those outside of Christ of the judgment to come. Now, with the vision of the bowls of wrath, we're seeing what happens to those who ignore the warning of the trumpets, refusing to repent of their rebellion.

The first thing John sees is a scene of worship. He sees "those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass" (v.2). Remember each of

the letters to the seven churches ended with various promises to those who would conquer or overcome. Here we see those people who have conquered gathered together praising God for the fulfillment of those promises.

They are gathered by a sea of glass mingled with fire, which should remind us of John's description of God's throne room in chapter 4, verse 6, where he says, "before the throne was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal." They are holding harps and singing a praise song to God, but not just any song. They're singing the song of Moses.

Again, think back to Exodus. The Israelites were being chased by Pharaoh and his army. They were trapped at the Red Sea, with the army coming to destroy them. God miraculously pulled back the water of the sea so they could safely cross. Then they watched that very sea cover and destroy the enemy that had sought to destroy them. I'm sure before God performed this miracle, they were terrified, seeing no way out of their predicament. However, once they were on the other side of the sea, they could look back and see God's hand at work as He brought them to safety.

The same is true of these saints that we read about in Revelation. On earth, they had many trials and tribulations. Some of them even died for the sake of Christ. During their trials, they may not have been able to see a way out. However, now that they are in heaven, on the other side of the sea, they can look back and see God's protection and deliverance.

The same may be true of us, as well. Often, when we're in the midst of a hard situation, we feel trapped. We wonder "Is this ever going to end? Is there a way out?" But eventually, it does end and we know that God brought us through.

Can any of you share an experience like that?

Let's look at this song that they sing:

“Great and amazing are your deeds,
O Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
O King of the nations!
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. (Revelation 15:3b-4)

What are some of God's attributes that the people are praising here? How can focusing on God's attributes help you during your trials?

While many people see Revelation as a book of judgment and woe, I've really been encouraged by the hope that can be found throughout the book, at least for those of us in Christ. Even here in this passage we can be encouraged that eventually we will reach the other side of our trials, even if that doesn't happen until we get to heaven. Even if life on earth is always hard, we know that it's only temporary. When we focus on God's amazing deeds, His just ways, His sovereignty, His holiness and righteousness, it takes our attention off of ourselves and our circumstances, and suddenly those things may not seem as bad anymore.

I know I've used this quote by Corrie Ten Boom before, but it's a good one, so I'll say it again, "If you look at the world, you'll be distressed. If you look within, you'll be depressed. If you look at God you'll be at rest."¹

Preparation for the Seven Bowls of Wrath (15:5-8)

After hearing this song, John looks and "the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened" (v.5). According to Derek Thomas, "This is the heavenly reality of which the tabernacle in the wilderness was an earthly replica. It represented the presence of God with his people."² Remember, however, in the tabernacle, God's presence was concealed behind the veil. The Israelites didn't have direct access to God. They needed the priest to mediate for them, to be the go-between for them and God. God's presence is no longer veiled for us, though. We have access to God's presence now through Christ as our mediator. One day, we will be able to enter His sanctuary and dwell with Him forever. Not yet, though, because something must take place first, before we can enter His sanctuary, as we'll see in a moment.

In Revelation, we see this tent opening, and from it come seven angels. They are clothed in "pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests" (v.6), symbolizing the holiness of their mission. They are sent by God. These angels are given bowls full of the wrath of God (v.7). We've read about bowls before, haven't we, in chapter 5, verse 8, where we see the twenty-four elders each holding a bowl "full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." This shows a connection between our prayers for justice and God's wrath. As Nancy Guthrie writes, "The wrath of God is the righteous, pure, and perfectly appropriate expression of his justice toward evil."³ So, for justice to take place, God's wrath must be poured on those who rebel against Him. There cannot be justice without wrath.

In verse 8, we read that "the sanctuary was filled with the 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." Remember, I just said that we can't enter the sanctuary yet, because something has to happen first? We can't enter until God's wrath is completely poured out. Nancy Guthrie describes it this way:

¹<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/32394-if-you-look-at-the-world-you-ll-be-distressed-if>

²Thomas, Derek. *Let's Study Revelation*, 127.

³Guthrie, Nancy. *Blessed: Experiencing the Promise of the Book of Revelation*, 173.

The wrath of God accomplishes something so that God's people will finally be able to enter his sanctuary. When the angels come out of the sanctuary with bowls of wrath poured out...it cleanses all of creation, making it a sanctuary in which God intends to dwell with his people forever. And this is such good news! You and I don't want to have to live forever in a world tainted by evil, rebellion, idolatry, and immorality. And we won't have to. God is determined to get all of the ugliness and evil cleaned out before we enter our forever home. Pouring out his wrath is God's glorious way of cleansing and preparing a home for us.⁴

How does that quote change the way that you think about God's wrath?

God's wrath is not a subject to be avoided. It shouldn't make us afraid or uncomfortable. It's an awesome aspect of His character, rooted in His holiness. Without His wrath being poured out, Satan would not be overthrown and evil would continue. So, we should celebrate His wrath as His means of providing us with a beautiful forever home, which we'll learn more about in our last lesson.

Pouring Out the Bowls of Wrath (16:1-21)

The First Four Bowls (v.1-9)

We see the same pattern with these judgments as we did with the seals and the trumpets. The first four are grouped together, where the fifth, sixth, and seventh are different. The first four bowl judgments are very similar to the trumpet judgments, which affect the earth and the people on the earth, and they are also reminiscent of the plagues against Egypt.

When the first bowl is poured out, "harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image" (v.2). Greg Beale indicates that the sores could figuratively represent some kind of psychological and spiritual torment, showing that those who follow the beast will be suffer miserably.⁵ However, this judgment is only for those bearing the mark of the beast, so those with the mark of Christ will be spared.

The second and third bowls are almost identical to the second and third trumpets. The seas and fresh water are tainted. With the trumpets, it's only partial, but with the bowls, all of the water in the seas, rivers, and springs becomes blood (v.3-4). We talked before about how these people would have been dependent on fishing. When the fish die, so does business, resulting in famine and poverty.

Can you imagine the stench of all the dead fish? According to Nancy Guthrie, this is symbolic, showing that the stench of idol worship permeates everything around those who engage in it.⁶ Idolatry is a sin that would affect every aspect of a person's life.

⁴Ibid., 174.

⁵ Beale, Greg. *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, 330.

⁶Guthrie, 176.

Also, the fresh water becoming blood is a fitting punishment for those who spilled the blood of the saints, as we see in verses 5-6, where the angel comments:

Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of the saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!" And I heard the altar saying, "Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!"

So much innocent blood was shed, but now those who persecuted them only have blood to drink. This is an answer to the saints' prayer for justice in Revelation 6:10: "They cried out with a loud voice, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'"

Notice, this judgment comes directly from God. Because God is holy and true, then everything He does is right and just. He cannot make a mistake. He will never deal with someone unfairly or unjustly. Although this judgment may seem drastic or intense, it's actually perfectly just. It's no more than these people deserve.

The fourth bowl is poured out on the sun, causing the heat to intensify and scorch the people with fire. Greg Beale sees this as figurative, recognizing the connection to Revelation 7:16, where it says of the saints, "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat." This is an allusion to Isaiah 49:10,⁷ where there is a connection between hunger and scorching heat.

John might also be thinking about Deuteronomy 32:22-24, where God promises judgment on idolators. He says that a fire is kindled by His anger, one that will devour the earth and set on fire the foundation of the mountains. He will heap disaster on them, and they will be wasted with hunger and devoured by plague.

So, the idea is that the scorching fire is not literal, but it refers to famine caused by this burning heat that probably results in drought and the crops not growing. This would fit with the previous judgments of water turning to blood, which also had a grave impact on the natural world as well as the economic structure.

You might think that after suffering from all of these judgments, the people would recognize their wicked ways and repent. However, we see in verse 9 that the opposite is true. The people blamed God for their suffering. They cursed Him and refused to repent.

The Fifth Bowl (16:10-11)

That leads to the fifth bowl being poured out upon "the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness" (v.10). While the other judgments were poured out upon the earth and affected the inhabitants thereof, this one is poured out upon the beast. It's an attack against Satan himself. This alludes back to the plague of darkness in Exodus. Pharaoh was thought to

⁷Beale, 335.

be the incarnation of the sun god Ra. So, by bringing about darkness, God showed His sovereignty over Pharaoh and all the false gods of Egypt.⁸ Here in Revelation, we also see God exerting His authority over Satan and his forces.

This could also be symbolic of spiritual darkness. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul writes, “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” One of Satan’s tactics is to blind people to the truth to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel. He traps them in the darkness.

Although many people fear the darkness, many also find comfort in it. They actually love it because it allows them to hide their true nature. So, God gives them up to the darkness, as we read in John 3:19-20:

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For whoever does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

That’s exactly what is going on in Revelation. The people love the darkness so much, they love their evil deeds so much, that they refuse to repent, even when faced with horrible judgment. We read in Revelation 16:10b-11 that the people gnawed their tongues in anguish and they cursed God for their pain and sores. These people were suffering horribly. Nancy Guthrie states, “Inherent in darkness is utter uncertainty, fearfulness, and a desperate aloneness.”⁹

Why would anyone choose to remain in the darkness rather than accept the light of the gospel? Why do people choose to blame God for their troubles?

Because they are blinded to the truth of their own condition, and to the truth of the gospel. So, rather than blaming the true source of their anguish, which is Satan and their own sin, they choose to curse God, thus refusing the only source of escape from their woes.

The Sixth Bowl (16:12-16)

Now we come to the sixth bowl, poured out upon the Euphrates River, which dried up to allow kings from the east to come (v.12). This would have been extremely significant to John’s audience. Considering the similarity with the Exodus, it would have likely brought to mind the drying up of the Red Sea. However, it also alludes to prophecies from Isaiah and Jeremiah, which both indicated that when God brought judgment upon Babylon, it would involve the drying up of the Euphrates River.¹⁰

Think back to when the Israelites were taken into captivity by the Babylonians. When the Persian king Cyrus came to attack the Babylonians, he diverted, or separated, the water of the Euphrates so his army could cross. Cyrus’ defeat of the Babylonians ultimately led to the

⁸Thomas, 129.

⁹Guthrie, 178.

¹⁰Ibid., 179.

Israelites being freed from their captivity and allowed to return home.¹¹ Thus, to the Israelites, the drying up of the Euphrates symbolized the defeat of their pagan enemies and freedom from captivity.

What we have with this sixth seal is preparation for a battle. The evil, counterfeit trinity is deceiving people, which is symbolized by these unclean frog-like spirits coming from their mouths (v.13). We've already discussed how Satan blinds people to the truth. Here we see him using this deception to actually raise up an army to fight against God. The people go from cursing God to an all-out assault against Him.

This army will gather to fight at Armageddon (v.16), which actually refers to the Mount of Megiddo. This was an extremely significant location for the Israelites as the site where they were often attacked by pagan nations (Judges 5:19; 2 Kings 23:29; 2 Chronicles 35:20-22), where kings who oppressed God's people were defeated (Judges 5:19-21), and where false prophets were destroyed (1 Kings 18:40).¹² It's also where the final defeat of all nations opposing Israel was prophesied to take place (Zech. 12:9-12). So, Megiddo became symbolic for Israel's battlefield against evil nations.

As with many passages in Revelation, there is some debate about the meaning of this passage. Vern Poythress seems to indicate that it will be an actual battle that takes place between the forces of good and evil at the return of Christ, as we see from the following quote:

Throughout the church age, there have been intense confrontations between God and the forces of Satan, but the most intense is at the second coming...In the climactic battle, all the forces of wickedness are assembled to make war against the warrior Lamb. This final battle reminds us of the battle between God and Pharaoh in Exodus 15:2, but the panorama is cosmic in scope.¹³

Derek Thomas, however, believes that this will not be a literal battle. Rather it symbolizes the continued growth of Satan's kingdom until Christ returns to overthrow it.¹⁴ Nancy Guthrie agrees with a symbolic battle where Satan launches his final attack against the church.¹⁵ Either way, we know that there will always be conflict between good and evil, conflict that will not be resolved until Christ comes again. When He does come, He will overthrow evil and the forces of righteousness will reign victorious.

We also know that Christ's coming will be a surprise, like a thief in the night (v.15). We have another blessed statement here: "Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed." This is reminiscent of Matthew 24:42-44:

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 181.

¹³Poythress, Vern. *The Returning King*, 156-57.

¹⁴Thomas, 131.

¹⁵Guthrie, 182.

Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

If we knew when Jesus was going to return, it would be easy to live however we wanted, waiting until the last minute to get right with God. However, we don't know when He's coming, so we must prepare our hearts now, making sure that we're clothed in His righteousness so that we won't be caught "naked and exposed" in our sin.

The Seventh Bowl (16:17-21)

We now reach the pouring out of the seventh bowl. We know from previous judgment cycles that the seventh judgment ushers in the second coming of Christ along with the final judgment. This bowl is poured out upon the air. It spreads over the entire corrupt world system that stands in opposition to God.

In Revelation 16:17-18, we hear a loud voice proclaiming "It is done!" as lightning flashes, thunder rumbles, and the earth quakes. This worldly city, which represents everything that opposes God, is split into three parts, showing its total destruction.

We also read in verse 19, "God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath." We'll actually read about this in more detail in the next two chapters, but suffice it to say here that Babylon represents the worldly system that draws people away from God and into idolatry, and she will be judged for her heinous sins.

Finally, we see further the destruction that comes with the final judgment in verses 20-21, where the physical landmasses of islands and mountain are destroyed, and great hailstones fall on the people. Again, this leads the people to curse God rather than repent.

We see in this lesson the two different responses to God's wrath. For unbelievers, God's wrath leads to misery and woe and cursing God. For believers, however, God's wrath leads to rejoicing as we see the enemies of God overthrown and evil vanquished to make room for a pure, perfect dwelling place with God.