

Lesson 24 Seven Bowls of God's Wrath Revelation 15:1-16:21

When I spoke to you three weeks ago, I gave a brief review of chapters 1-11 that many of you have said was helpful. So I'm going to take a couple of minutes and repeat that and add chapters 12-14 that bring us to this week's lesson.

So far we have the church raptured into heaven, a glorious view of the throne room of God and the Worthy Lamb who has a scroll with seven seals. He opens six seals of judgment upon the earth. Then there is a brief interlude while 144,000 Jews are sealed and protected to be God's witnesses during the Tribulation period. With the breaking of the seventh seal the scroll of destiny was opened to reveal the end of history as it began to draw near.

Then six trumpets sounded judgments. And again an interlude to allow two witnesses to come with signs and powers and testimony for 1,260 days (three and a half years). They are martyred and rejoiced over, but resurrected and ascend into heaven in sight of all. Then the seventh trumpet sounds and heaven rejoices, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever."

Revelation 12 introduced us to the three key characters in the drama of the last half of the Tribulation: Satan who is the dragon, the false christ/Antichrist who is the beast (and has a lot of similarities with Satan), and the false prophet - called "another beast." These three are, in a sense, an evil trinity opposing the true God and His people on earth. In that chapter, the dragon/Satan, who had been hurled down from heaven, pursued the woman, whom I identified as Israel, as she fled from the flood sent to destroy her. She woman was supernaturally protected for 3 ½ years while Satan went off to war against the rest of her offspring. I told you I thought that was the 144,000 sealed witnesses.

In chapter 13, the beast / Antichrist was given great power, blasphemed God, and made war against saints. We were also told of "another beast" who forced earth's inhabitants to worship the Antichrist because he had been wounded and yet lived. He did this by performing great signs to deceive, giving breath to the image of the beast, and demanding that all take the mark of the beast on their right hand or forehead. That mark was 666. Vance did a good job of reminding us we only have two choices – the mark of Jesus, or the mark of the beast.

Now, just before the third series of judgments, the seven bowls of God's wrath in chapters 15-16, John is taken behind the scenes of history to learn the fundamental reason for the intense antagonism that is mounting against believers in the last days. To understand that the rising tide of persecution is simply a final death struggle of an already defeated enemy will encourage believers to hold fast until it is over.

I have a book in my library titled *The Acrostic Bible* by Barry Huddleston. I bought it back in 1978 when I became a Christian and it's now out of print. I've made copies of the page for Revelation because I thought you might enjoy it. By using the acrostic "Prophecy About the Future," you can remember what's in each chapter of Revelation. This isn't anything new as a memorization aid. You probably already know a couple and maybe don't realize it. Have you heard GRACE (God's riches at Christ's Expense)? How about FAITH (Forsaking all I take Him)? Well, chapters 14-15-16 of Revelation spell the word "the,"

- 14 - Time is ripe for harvest (we looked at that vision last week)
- 15 - Harps played for God (the scene of this chapter is in heaven)
- 16 - Emptying of the bowls (this chapter takes place on earth)

The scroll containing God's program for the future has seven seals. The seventh seal was broken in Revelation 8:1, and we were introduced to seven angels with seven trumpets. The seventh trumpet message is the longest and began with the great announcement of Revelation 11:15. "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever."

Within that seventh trumpet message are three signs and seven visions. The **signs** of the seventh trumpet message are:

- ...sign of the woman (12:1) representing Israel
- ...sign of the dragon (12:3) with 7 heads/10 horns representing Satan's control of world empires and governments.
- ...sign of the seven last plagues (15:1)

The **visions** of the seventh trumpet message are:

- ...vision of the beast with seven heads (13:1)
- ...vision of the beast with two horns (13:11)
- ...vision of the 144,000 (14:1-5)
- ...vision of the gospel and judgments (14:6-13)
- ...vision of the final harvest (14:14-20)
- ...vision of the heavenly temple and the seven last plagues (15:1-16:21)
- ...last vision in the seventh trumpet message is in chapters 17-22 and we'll discuss it as we get there.

In Chapter 15 (and remember this chapter takes place in heaven), John saw a sea of glass mingled with fire. This sea of glass is different from the sea of glass we saw in chapter 4 in that it is mingled with fire. This may indicate that those standing on it have gone through the fire (perhaps a reference to the tribulation period) or it may simply symbolize the judgment of God.

Those standing on the sea of glass are the martyrs of the tribulation period we read about in Revelation 7:9-17 who come out of that terrible time as believers in Jesus Christ, ones who refuse to worship the beast or take his mark. Their position of "standing" implies victory and conquest--they laid down their lives for their faith; now they stand victorious in heaven.

Moses and the children of Israel sang a song to the Lord in Exodus 15 after the armies of Pharaoh were destroyed in the Red Sea. It's refrain in vs. 2 is, "The Lord is my strength and song; and He is become my salvation." It is a song of victory and a reminder of God's protection of those who put their trust in Him. The song of the Lamb in Revelation 5 speaks of God's redemption and the final victory of His people. The 144,000 sang a song that nobody else could sing; but these songs **all** saints can sing. They are victory songs! Donald Barnhouse says, "to sing the song of Moses and the Lamb means to sing the song of physical deliverance and spiritual redemption." The message of this song centers in the praise of God. The focus is on Who He is and what He can and will do. It's a grand reminder to all believers in four ways:

To Praise God for His works, ways, worthiness and worship . . . emphasizing His power, plan, perfection and purpose.

1. They praise the **works** of God, emphasizing His **power**. These bowl judgments again demonstrate the mighty power of God Himself.
2. They praise the **ways** of God, emphasizing His **plan**. The Lord is right and just in all He does. He is faithful to His promises, totally reliable.
3. They praise the **worthiness** of God, emphasizing His **perfection**. He is holy, completely separate from all He has created, a distinction uniquely His. Only He deserves worship and praise.
4. They praise the **worship** of God, emphasizing His **purpose**. God's ultimate purpose is for every knee to bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Following the victor's song of praise, John sees that the temple in heaven is open. It is more closely defined for us as the tabernacle of Testimony (remember the portable sanctuary in which God dwelt during Israel's wanderings in the wilderness that we studied about in Exodus. It had a Holy of Holies.). In the present context the opening of the heavenly tabernacle suggests that the last seven plagues are to come from the holy presence of God. They come in fulfillment of His covenant relationship with those who have remained faithful. This awesome scene reminds us of the vision Isaiah describes in chapter 6 of his prophecy:

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above Him were seraphs, each with six wings....and they were calling to one another 'holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory.' At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke."

The seven angels emerge from inner sanctuary of the Temple. They do not act with impatience, but in strict accord with God's will. They have come out from His presence to face a world that has reached the climax of its wickedness. The angels are arrayed in fine linen which characterizes divine righteousness; and girded across their chest are golden sashes perhaps showing divine restraint . . . they are calm and dispassionate in what they do -- like a surgeon who knows what has to be done even if it is painful. What these angels do in pouring out God's wrath upon the earth in the seven last plagues is a demonstration of the holy and righteous character of God Himself.

One of the worship leaders of heaven (one of the four living creatures) gives the seven golden bowls to the seven angels. When the angels of destruction receive their bowls of wrath, the temple is filled with smoke (symbolizing the glory and power of God.) In John's vision the smoke serves to warn people that no one will be allowed to enter this Holy of Holies until the seven last plagues have been poured out. No one can approach God Almighty until His wrath is complete. The time for repentance is over. The patience and long-suffering of God Almighty have been exhausted. The doors of access to the presence of God are closed and judgment has begun.

Then a loud voice from the temple (perhaps the voice of God Himself, since the temple is now closed to anyone else) said "Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on earth." And in vs. 17 He proclaims, "It is done!" The martyrs in glory had asked, "How long?", and now their cry was answered.

We need to remember the people on the earth have already suffered from the seal and trumpet judgments. The KJV calls these bowl judgments, vials. Bowls is probably better since the Greek word specifies a shallow dish almost like a saucer rather than a bottle. The contents of a bowl or saucer are quickly and easily poured out. The final judgment commences in chapter 16. The world has never seen such horror and suffering as this period of judgment brings. No wonder the Old Testament prophets call this "the great and terrible day of the Lord."

I don't want to spend too much time on the gory details of these seven plagues. It's obvious, especially to those of you who were with us in our Exodus study, that these plagues are reminiscent of the plagues called down by Moses on the land of Egypt.

Bowl 1 -- Malignant Sores

Think about it . . . There, on the right hand, a horrible, putrefying, incurable cancer. There on the face or forehead, a loathsome, ugly, disfiguring and agonizing blotch where the mark of the Beast was taken. Men become horrible to look upon, and pain never ends. It's an awesome thought to consider almost the entire population of the world suffering from a painful malady that nothing can cure. An outward manifestation of the inner corruption, pain, and the ugliness of sin.

Bowl 2 - Sea Turned to Blood

In the second trumpet judgment remember what appears to be a meteor crashed into the sea and one third of the sea became blood and one third of its creatures died. In this second bowl judgment, the results are even more catastrophic - this bowl of wrath causes the death of every living creature in the sea, one of the major food sources of the world. Imaging the waves of blood and what would be washed up on the beaches as the tides ebb and flow. Every coastline around the globe is girdled by death.

Bowl 3 - Fresh Waters Turned to Blood

There is deep spiritual significance attached to the blood. Leviticus 17:11 (which might be called the John 3:16 of the O.T.) says "for the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls; for it is the blood, by reason of life that makes atonement." That which has always been the symbol of salvation in the midst of life, becomes now the symbol of condemnation in the midst of death. Then heaven gives justification for this judgment -- Since they shed the blood of God's people, it's only right they should drink blood. In God's government, the punishment fits the crime. Pharaoh tried to drown Jewish boy babies, only right his armies drown in Red Sea. Haman planned to hang Mordecai, but he was hanged on those gallows. King Saul refused to obey God and slay the Amalekites, so he was slain by an Amalekite.

The third trumpet judgment affected 1/3 of the springs and rivers. In this third bowl judgment, **all** the springs and rivers are affected. The drinking water of the world is now polluted. I would imagine that would cause worldwide panic.

And the altar responds (probably the voice of the martyrs under the altar we saw in Rev. 6:9) "Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments."

Bowl 4 - Men are Scorched

Heat scorches the planet. Remember too the water system is now useless, you can imagine how people will suffer from thirst. In the fourth trumpet judgment the light of the sun, moon, stars were reduced by 1/3. In the fourth bowl judgment, only the sun is affected and now it becomes a curse as men are scorched by the sun's burning rays. This is no summer heat wave. God is cursed . . . the world knows He is the source of this judgment. But they do not repent. Don't you find that amazing?

Bowl 5 -Darkness and Pain

In Matthew 25:10 Jesus spoke of the awful consequences of eternal punishment, describing it as "outer darkness" where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth." This darkness of the fifth bowl judgment is a preview of hell itself. Again mankind rails against God and refuses to repent. The prophet Joel foretold long ago, "The day of the Lord comes . . . A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness." (Joel 2:1-2)

In Jesus' Olivet discourse He warned the sun would be darkened and the moon would withhold its light. Since men have chosen the powers of darkness as their spiritual guides and have scorned the Light of the world, God gives them what they want . . . darkness, thick darkness that could be felt.

Bowl 6 -Euphrates Dried Up

The Bible does not use phrase "the battle of Armageddon." Armageddon comes from two Hebrew words "har Megiddo, the hill of Megiddo. The word Megiddo means "place of troops," or "place of slaughter." It's an area about 14 miles wide and 20 miles long that forms what Napoleon called "the most natural battlefield of the whole earth." Standing on Mount Carmel and overlooking that great plain, you can understand why it would be used for gathering armies of the nations. It was on that plain that Barak defeated the armies of Canaan. Gideon met the Midianites there. There King Saul lost his life.

Now the dragon (Satan), the beast (antichrist) and the false prophet (second beast) are seen together as the trinity of evil, and from the mouth of each there comes an unclean spirit. These unclean spirits are like frogs, which are numbered among the unclean animals. and coming from the mouth they represent every kind of blasphemy, false teaching, and filthy language. The widely ranging activity of these froglike spirits indicates the spread of falsehood and mutiny against God as world leaders are drawn into the culminating assault of defiance. Possessed of satanic power, they are enabled to perform signs, even as Christ foretold in Mark 13:22. Paul warned too in 2 Thess 2:9-10.

These unclean spirits mobilize the kings of the whole world; national, political and intellectual leaders and their forces for worldwide unification of power for the purpose of worldwide domination. This is all according to God's plan. The Gentile nations will look on Armageddon as a battle, but to God, it will only be a "supper" for the fowls of the air as we'll see in Revelation 19.

This drying up of the Euphrates makes way for the kings of the East to invade the Middle East. People are fond of quoting Rudyard Kipling's line, "East is East and West is west and never the twain shall meet." But the quotation goes on to say, "till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's Great Judgment Seat." There is a time when East and West shall meet. It will happen at Armageddon.

Bowl 7 -A Great Earthquake

The devil is the "prince of the air" as we read in Ephesians 2:2. So perhaps this seventh bowl has a special effect on his domain. A devastating earthquake with tremendous upheaval in cities, mountains and topography. Satan's entire system is now about to be judged by God: his religious system (the harlot, Rev. 17); his political and economic system (Babylon, Rev. 18); and his military system (the armies, Rev. 19).

Now, the hailstones comes weighing a 100 lbs. each. Are some of you old enough to remember ice boxes when big 50 lb. cubes of ice were delivered for refrigeration? They were big! Just as Egyptian leaders did not repent with the plague of hail, so people during this time will blaspheme and curse God. No wonder hail comes, for blasphemers are supposed to be stoned to death according to Leviticus 24:16.

Revelation 16:15 is a brief parenthesis -- the voice of the Lord intervenes with words of assurance and encouragement for His faithful servants rather than another warning for the last days now at hand. The one who claims He is coming as a thief is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Second Coming will be a surprise to many, but not to those who are watching and ready. Vs. 15 gives us the third beatitude of Revelation: Remember them?

1:3 - "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near."

14:13 - "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Yes, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them."

16:15 - "Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed."

Vile spirits are defiling the earth, but His saints, keeping their garments unspotted and watchfully looking for His coming, are in no danger of losing their blessedness. Just as the Lord appeared suddenly in the darkness of night when the disciples in their little boat seemed to be overwhelmed by the storm, He is again speaking with assuring words, "Be of good courage, it is I. Have no fear!"

Scripture always encourages us to be ready and alert. Sue Kimber and her husband Tom who teaches on Wednesday night occasional are planning to go to China next year as missionaries. She made a wonderful statement last week that says a lot -- particularly of those who must stand firm in their convictions and faith. She said, "We must always be ready to preach, pray or die."

The Antichrist imprisons, tortures, and murders the followers of Christ under the illusion he is ridding himself of his enemies. In reality, all he is doing is running a shuttle service to heaven!

I think there are three things clear from these two chapters:

1. There will be the completion of God's plan of judgment.
2. It will be the greatest catastrophe of all time.
3. It will be the consequence God brings on those who worship the beast and his image.

If you have trusted Jesus Christ for your salvation and made Him your Savior; you are a part of the church. I believe the church will not be on earth during this terrible period of bowl judgments. We will be in heaven with the bridegroom. But we know sorrowfully that not everyone has made that commitment.

There is a very practical, contemporary lesson to learn from these chapters we can apply to our lives today: It was given in order to change our lives right now. That is "judgment does not produce repentance!"

It was never intended to. As we see in this passage it often makes people more stubborn and resistant to the truth. How then, does God change the hearts and lives of people? By the demonstration of grace and mercy. Paul says, "do you show contempt for His riches and kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you towards repentance?"

So let us be grateful for the grace of God in our lives. For the age of grace that is still upon the earth. It is the grace of God, not his judgment that has brought us from death to life. It is His grace that invites us to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is grace that changes us and makes us into new creatures. And ultimately . . . it is grace that teaches us how to live in a world gone mad.

Questions?