

Revelation Chapters 15 and 16

The Seven Bowl Judgments

“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” (Revelation 15 v 1) – so John introduces the chapters describing the terrible, climactic ‘bowl judgments’.

No matter how awful these judgments appear to be, this first verse reminds us that they are “the last”, and that with them “the wrath of God is finished”. When the seventh angel pours out his bowl into the air a loud voice from the temple cries “It is done!” (Revelation 16 v 17).

God’s judgments are finite, but – by contrast – his steadfast love and mercies never end (see Lamentations 3 v 22, 23)...

The seven angels with seven plagues (Revelation 15 v 1 to 8)

- John is looking at the seven angels, when his eye is caught by another vision which he describes in v 2 to 4. What does he see, and what is the significance of the various elements of the vision?
- Who are involved, and what encouragement would this give to those facing persecution and suffering?

“Standing beside the sea of glass” – the Greek for ‘beside’ (*ἐπί, epi*) can also mean ‘on’. Some argue that in the ‘architecture’ of heaven, the sea of glass symbolises the Word of God, linked to the idea of the Tabernacle’s laver and the washing of water by the word (Ephesians 5 v 26), so that these saints are ‘standing on God’s Word’.

For the “song of Moses” (v 3), refer to Exodus 15 v 1 to 18 and Deuteronomy 32 v 1 to 43; for the “song of the Lamb”, refer to Revelation 5 v 9 to 12. This song, rooted in the Old Testament, celebrates God’s works and ways (v 3), and God’s worth and worship (v 4).

These saints are only focused on God, and not on their own costly and glorious victory. They have the heart of true worship: it’s all about God, not about us...

“Out of the sanctuary came the seven angels” (v 6) – these angels bring God’s final judgment. It is significant that they come directly from the heavenly temple, from the presence and throne of God.

Their clothing (“pure, bright linen”) reminds us that God’s judgment is pure and righteous.

The “golden bowls” are shallow ‘censers’ as used in the temple to hold the fire when incense was burned, and whose contents were easily and completely poured out.

The seven bowls of God’s wrath (Revelation 16 v 1 to 21)

The seven ‘bowl judgments’ have some parallels with the first nine plagues of Egypt described in Exodus Chapters 7 to 10:

- The first bowl judgment (sores) parallels the sixth Egyptian plague (boils).
- The third bowl judgment (rivers to blood) echoes the first Egyptian plague (Nile to blood).
- The fifth and seventh bowl judgments (darkness, hail stones) are reminiscent of the ninth and seventh Egyptian plagues (darkness and hail storm, respectively).

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Also some of the bowl judgments are ‘total’ versions of the ‘partial’ trumpet judgments (Revelation 8):

- The second and third trumpet judgments affect one third of the sea and rivers, whereas the second and third bowl judgments pollute the whole sea and all rivers.
- In the fourth trumpet judgment one third of the sun’s light is darkened, but in the fifth bowl judgment there is total darkness.

The river Euphrates (v 12) was considered a secure barrier against invasion from the empires of the east. If the river were dried up and made into a road, massive armies could move westward with ease. Why do these armies come? Is it to wipe out Israel? Is it to rebel against the Antichrist? Ultimately, they come to do battle against God himself (Psalm 2 v 1, 2).

‘Har-Megiddo’ (= the hill of Megiddo, or ‘Armageddon’) is in a region historically associated with decisive battles:

- Deborah over Sisera (Judges 5 v 19)
- Gideon over the Midianites (Judges Chapter 7, the ‘spring of Harod’ is in the Megiddo valley)
- Pharaoh over Josiah (2 Kings 23 v 29)
- A place of end-times mourning (Zechariah 12 v 11).

But the winner of this battle is clear – it is “the great day of God the Almighty” (v 14).

“The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air” (v 17), indicating God’s judgment against “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2 v 2).

Hail (v 21) is frequently used as an instrument of judgment against God’s enemies:

- Egypt (Exodus 9 v 24)
- The Canaanites (Joshua 10 v 11)
- Apostate Israel (Isaiah 28 v 2)
- Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 38 v 22).

The bowls of God’s judgment are directed against “the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image” (v 2).

- So how do these people respond (v 9, 11, 21)? Do they repent?

Judgment cannot produce repentance: it was never intended to. God changes hearts through his *grace and mercy*.

The Book of Revelation was written to the seven churches in Asia, to believers and Christ-followers, and its purpose is to change *our* lives, right now!

Between the sixth and seventh bowl judgments there is a brief ‘parenthesis’ in verse 15 when Jesus reminds us “Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on...” But remember, we are “not in darkness... for that day to surprise you like a thief”, but we are children of the light (1 Thessalonians 5 v 4, 5).