

Series Revelation

This Message #25 Revelation 15:1-8

There are seven separate visions in chapters 12, 13, 14, and the passage for today. These visions contrast the status and outcome of God's faithful people and the evildoers on earth. This series began with the description of the woman who was pregnant and gave birth to a son. Her son was identified as the One "who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter," a clear reference to Jesus. The woman's great enemy was the enormous dragon, Satan, who sought to devour the new-born baby at the time of birth. In the vision, the child was "snatched up to God and to his throne," indicating a victory for God and a defeat for Satan.

The visions which followed then described the anger and efforts of the devil to disrupt the purposes of God. The devil made war against "those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus." This series described in a general way the spiritual conflict within human history during the past 2000 plus years. Scripture indicates that this conflict will increase and intensify as history approaches the end of the age, and will end only when Jesus returns to earth.

Contrasted with the efforts of the devil to thwart the purposes of God were the visions revealed to the Apostle John of those who were the faithful followers of Jesus. John saw them in the presence of God in heaven, where they were singing their new songs of praises to the Lamb. They had been redeemed out of the spiritual persecutions and pressures inflicted on them by the devil. Scripture explains that "They overcame him (Satan) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death" (*Revelation 12:11*).

It is not apparent in an obvious way, but the book of Revelation has a very organized structure. Within each series there is a sequence of sevens. There were seven church fellowships in chapters 2 and 3. In chapters 4 and 5 there were seven seal judgments which were opened by Jesus. This was followed by the seven trumpet judgments of chapters 8 through 11. The series we are concluding today has seven visions which contrast the status of the redeemed people of God with the earthdwellers. This passage will introduce us to another set of seven judgments, referred to as the "bowl" judgments.

It is helpful to keep in mind that there is a lot of overlap in the visions which were presented to John. To some extent, each series covers the same time period, repeating in new ways the former events and also adding fresh details not previously explained.

Some commentators have built elaborate systems of interpretation around the events of the end of the age, with carefully calculated chronological sequences, and fulfillments drawn from current events, but it seems to me that the visions are intended more to generally enlighten us about end-time events than to supply us with precise data. It is also important to keep in mind that the information in the book of Revelation was written to encourage believers throughout the Church Age.

The passage we will think about today is the last vision in this particular series, which has contrasted the status and outcome of God's faithful people and the evildoers on earth.

Read Revelation 15:1-8

Last week we considered one of the main reasons John was commanded to write and distribute the visions he saw: It was to encourage the followers of Jesus to "obey God's commandments and to hold to the testimony of Jesus." During this Church age, believers must not give in to the attitudes and behaviors and pressures inflicted on them by the people who follow the ways of this world. Encouragement and warning: these are the "take aways" for believers in chapters 12, 13, 14, and 15.

In verse 1 John saw "another great and marvelous sign in heaven." This is the third such "sign" that John has seen. At the beginning of chapter 12, that is, at the beginning of this series of visions, John stated that both the woman and the great dragon were "signs." In Scripture, "signs" point beyond themselves in order to authenticate divine authority. Classic examples in Scripture include the rainbow which was given to Noah as a sign of God's covenant with humanity (*Genesis 9:12-13*). Circumcision was a sign given to Abraham to indicate his covenant relationship with God (*Genesis 17:9-14*). In the Gospel of John, the miracles of Jesus were referred to as "signs" whereby Jesus "revealed his glory" and led His disciples to "put their faith in him" (*John 2:11*). Now, in Revelation chapter 15, at the end of this series, there is "another great sign."

The first two signs, the woman and the dragon, represented the two antagonists of the Church age. There has been constant spiritual warfare between them since the incarnation of Jesus. The third sign represents the action of God which will bring that spiritual conflict to a close. The sign will be manifested by seven angels who will pour out the seven last plagues of God's wrath. The text emphasizes the word "last" because with these plagues "God's wrath is completed." The word "completed" (*Greek "teleo"*) means "finished," "reached its goal," and "brought to an end."

We must be careful here to understand what the word "completed" actually means. It refers to the pouring out of God's wrath. The people of earth have already experienced some of God's wrath in a sequence of judgments. However, after God's wrath is completed, there will still be the final judgment. The final judgment will occur when the devil, the beast, and the false prophet, and all whose names are not found in the book of life, will be thrown into the lake of fire.

The seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments will affect the earthdwellers who are unrepentant sinners. Some of these judgments were in the nature of warnings designed to motivate people to repent of their evil ways and to give glory to God. More generally, the judgments are intended to make earthdwellers recognize and bow before the sovereignty of God or, at least, to awaken them to the reality of God.

Chapter 16, which we will think about next week, describes the bowl judgments, the final judgments of wrath, but before John sees these bowl judgments, he is given another vision of the followers of Jesus in heaven. John sees them standing by the heavenly sea singing praises to God for His great and righteous works. The sea of glass was mentioned previously in this book. Back in chapter 4 John saw the heavenly throne room in which was seated the Father and the 24 Elders. Before the throne "there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal." (*Revelation 4:6*). In the present passage the sea of glass is "mingled with fire."

Standing beside the sea were "those who had been victorious over the beast." The word translated "victorious" here is the same verb translated "overcome" in numerous other verses earlier in the letter. For example, at the end of each message given to the seven church fellowships in chapters 2 and 3, believers were urged to be "overcomers"; that is, to live out their faith with steadfastness and endurance.

The ones standing beside the sea had been victorious over the beast and over his image and over the number of the beast's name. These three areas represented victory over political pressure to reject Christ and follow the antichrist; over religious pressure to reject Christ and worship the antichrist; and over economic pressure to reject Christ in order to buy and sell (*see Revelation 13*). We know from previous verses that some of the victorious believers had been faithful unto death.

When John saw these victorious believers, they were standing by the heavenly sea and singing like the ancient Israelites who had just passed through the Red Sea. They burst into song when they realized that they were safe and their enemies had drowned. There are many parallels between the rescue of the Israelites from Egypt and the rescue of the redeemed from the earth.

Think about the situation of the Hebrews in Egypt. They had lived in Egypt for four centuries. At first their circumstances were good, but in the fourth century a monstrous Pharaoh came to power and he oppressed God's people terribly. Then suddenly God began to act. Plague after plague was aimed at the stubborn Egyptians. The land of Egypt was eventually devastated. With the death of the first-born sons of Egyptian families, Pharaoh finally gave permission for the Israelites to leave the country. Their initial joy soon turned to fear when they realized that their way was blocked by the Red Sea and that the Egyptian army was in hot pursuit. Through a great miracle, the Lord divided the waters of the Red Sea, allowing the Israelites to cross on dry ground to the other side. And when Pharaoh's army followed, the waters returned to normal, drowning the entire army. "Not one of them survived" (*Exodus 14:28*). The corpses floating ashore demonstrated beyond dispute God's power and ability to free His people. Safely on the other side of the sea, Moses led the Israelites in a great song service.

Read excerpts from Exodus 15:1-18

The theme of victory in Exodus 15 prefigures the praise and adoration in the song of the end-time victors. Both groups declare that God is worthy of glory and honor because his great and marvelous works are true and righteous. The song of the victors is not one of personal salvation but a song acclaiming the mighty works of God.

In the same way that God delivered His people, the Israelites, from Egypt, even while pouring out plagues on the Egyptians, so He will deliver His people, the followers of Jesus, from the grip of the beast, even while pouring out his wrath on the worshipers of the beast. In Egypt it was a contest between Pharaoh and God over ownership of the people of Israel. At the end of the age, it will be conflict between Satan and God over the followers of Jesus. Scripture assures us that the same “great and wondrous deeds” of judgment exercised by God when he hurled “horse and rider into the sea” (*Exodus 15:1*) will occur again when he hurls the enemies of the people of God into eternal punishment (*Revelation 14:9-11, 17-20*).

Notice in verse 3 that the Lamb is designated as the “Lord God Almighty.” This is because He possesses the power to carry out whatever he determines to do. His sovereignty is unlimited. He dwells in unapproachable majesty. He is also King of the Ages, a reference to His everlasting nature.

The question in verse 4, “Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name?” is rhetorical. The question implies that universal recognition of Jesus as the one true God will come. At the end of the age God will be acknowledged and praised by all nations, even pagan nations, because His righteous acts will be fully manifested. This statement does not imply conversion but only acknowledgement of God’s power and might and righteous actions from all over creation. The Apostle Paul wrote: “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father” (*Philippians 2:10-11*).

The Song of the Lamb concludes with three reasons to give glory to the name of the Lord God Almighty: First, He “alone is holy.” The word “holy” here is a special word meaning “with perfect moral purity.” Second, “all nations will come and worship before him.” Every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord of all. And third, His “righteous acts will be revealed.” No one will be able to say that God is unfair in His judgments.

In verses 5 through 8 John continued with the description of the “sign” phenomenon he saw in verse 1. Heaven was opened so that he could see the temple from which the seven angels of destruction emerged. The temple is more specifically defined here as “the Tabernacle of the Testimony.” This was the name applied by God to the tabernacle used by the Israelites during their years of wandering in the wilderness. This ancient tabernacle was called the “Tabernacle of the Testimony” because it contained the two tables of testimony brought down from Mt. Sinai by Moses (*Exodus 40:20; Deuteronomy 10:5*).

The fact that the seven angels came out of the temple, from the presence of God, and received golden bowls of divine wrath from one of the four living creatures who were near the throne, indicates that they were being designated (commissioned) to carry out a special assignment.

As the angels received their bowls, something extraordinary happened inside the temple. It was filled with smoke, symbolizing the glory and power of God. In the Old Testament, the presence of God was often revealed by cloud or smoke, and when that happened, it was impossible for any creatures to be present. For example, when the tabernacle was first set up in the wilderness, “the glory of the LORD filled it” so that even “Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (*Exodus 40:34-35*). Likewise, when the temple build by Solomon was dedicated, “the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the temple” (*1 Kings 8:10-11*). When Isaiah was given a vision of “the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, ... the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke” (*Isaiah 6:1, 4*).

The smoke here in Revelation indicates the presence of God in all his glory and power, and that His power was about to be expended in holy judgment upon wickedness. We read in verse 8 that “no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.” This was one of those moments when the sovereign majesty of God was so overwhelming that no one could be in His presence.

I hope you appreciate the contrast between the victorious believers who were singing the praises of the Lord God Almighty and the earthdwellers who were about to experience the unimaginable final outpouring of God's wrath. It is impossible for us to grasp the hatred of God toward all things evil. It is far far better to be fearful of an eternally loving gracious overwhelming God than to experience the judgment of an all-powerful God who is filled with unimaginable anger and wrath.