

Series Revelation

This Message #26 Revelation 16:1-21

The Apostle John had an incredibly productive career as an apostle. He was a member of the inner circle of the followers of Jesus Christ. He wrote the most intimate of the gospel accounts about the life and ministry of Jesus. He had leadership responsibilities in several locations in the 1st Century church fellowships. He provided encouragement and practical help to believers in his pastoral letters. In his latter years, while he was exiled to the island of Patmos, was given the great number of visions we know as the Book of Revelation.

He was instructed to write about these visions and pass on the information to seven of the church fellowships in Asia Minor. These writings were later included in the New Testament and, as a result, John had been a teacher and encourager for believers for about 2000 years.

Let me remind you of how the visions in the book of Revelation are presented to us. They are organized into several series or collections, each of which focused on some spiritual aspect of Church history. The first series focused on seven church fellowships which existed in the 1st Century. John saw the Lord Jesus standing among these fellowships. Jesus understood the circumstances of these congregations so thoroughly that He could encourage them in what they were doing well and warn them about their shortcomings. These fellowships had characteristics which will continue until the end of the age. That is why it is beneficial for us to study them.

In the next series, John's attention was directed to heaven. He was privileged to see the throne room of God the Father. Many unique creatures and angels were worshipping the One on the throne. John also saw the Lamb, Jesus, the only living being in heaven who was qualified to take the scroll of human history from the hand of the Father and to open its seals. As each of the seals was opened, John saw examples of the inhumanities and injustices inflicted by people on other people. He also saw the suffering and persecution inflicted by the world on the followers of Jesus. In the same way that the good and bad characteristics of the 1st Century Churches continue on to the present day, the sufferings and persecutions of believers will continue until the end of the age.

The third series of visions described the “Trumpet Judgments.” Just as trumpets were used in the Old Testament to alert people to an emergency situation, the trumpets in this series were used to warn the people on earth of impending doom. Unfortunately, in spite of the inconveniences and pains suffered by earthdwellers, and the deaths of many of them, those “who were not killed ... still did not repent” of their attitudes and behaviors (*Revelation 9:20*).

Last week we concluded the fourth series of visions. Chapters 12 through 15 described the spiritual conflict between Jesus and His Church and Satan and his helpers. The Church was represented in the vision by a woman and her baby; Satan by an enormous red dragon. “The dragon was enraged at the woman and her offspring and went off to make war against them.” In this series we read about the persecutions and martyrdoms of the followers of Jesus, as well as their overcoming victories and celebrations in heaven. Chapters 12 through 15 described the heavenly status of those who were faithful to Jesus and obedient to His commandments, and the calamities faced by those who were identified with Satan.

Today we will think about the next series of judgments. This will be the fifth sweep or overview in this book of Revelation. This series of judgments is referred to as the “Bowl Judgments.” This new series was introduced in the verses we thought about last week when John saw seven angels come out of the temple in heaven with the seven last plagues of the wrath of God.

Read Revelation 16:1-21

The series of Seal, Trumpet, and Bowl Judgments all relate to the scroll mentioned in chapter 5. By taking the scroll from the hand of the Father, Jesus assumed control of human history. During the past 2000 years, there has been simultaneously the dismantling of the order of creation and an increase in the number of believers in heaven. During our study of the Seal judgments we learned that one-fourth of the earth’s population will be killed by sword, famine, and plague (*Revelation 6:8*). During the Trumpet judgments one-third more of the earth’s population will be killed. The Bowl judgments will continue to severely and negatively affect the conditions on earth. These terrible, tragic Bowl Judgments are expressions of God’s wrath against evil.

It is necessary for the wrath of God to be poured out on both humanity and the natural world. Everyone and everything associated with this planet must be purged of evil before God can dwell among His people, as He once did and as He promised to do again. This is why the Apostle Peter wrote, "The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare." Then he added, "But in keeping with his (God's) promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (*II Peter 3:10, 13*). The word "righteousness" refers to the absence of evil, and to the purity and holiness of the restored creation of the future.

The Apostle Paul explained the purpose of God's wrath this way: "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed, for the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (*Romans 8:19-22*).

The point is that all of God's physical creation, both human and natural, animate and inanimate, was affected by the disobedience of Adam and Eve. All aspects of creation became contaminated by evil. God not only removed His Spirit from Adam and Eve because of their disobedience, but He cursed the ground because of them. God said, "Because you ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, ... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground since from it you were taken" (*Genesis 3:17-19*).

God's work of redemption will not be complete until He has purged our planet of everything evil and associated with evil. All the effects of the curse of sin must be eradicated. Then, and only then, will there be a new heaven and new earth, a new clean pure dwelling place for God. The book of Revelation ends with a description of the new eternal Holy City. In that uncontaminated, holy place of the future, God will once again dwell with people. "He will live with them. They will be His people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (*Revelation 21:1-3*).

That's the rationale for the judgments of God. They are expressions of His wrath against the perpetrators of evil. The Bowl Judgments described in our reading today bring to a conclusion the monumental struggle between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. This struggle has been going on since Genesis chapter 3. The outcome has never been in doubt since God is sovereign over everything, but it has taken, and is taking, a long time to reach the climax of history because God has chosen to work through individuals who voluntarily submit themselves to Him. Unfortunately, there have been very few individuals throughout history who have placed their faith in God and been obedient to His ways.

In verse 1 John heard a loud voice from the temple instructing the angels to pour out upon the earth the bowls of the wrath of God. The voice is that of God Himself, for according to the last verse in chapter 15, the presence of God was so overwhelming that no one was able to enter the temple until the seven angels had completed their mission.

The first bowl will bring loathsome and painful sores upon mankind. This bowl of wrath is directed to those "who have the mark of the beast and worship his image." Those who bear the mark of the beast will receive the "marks" of the retribution of God on their bodies.

After the second angel pours his bowl into the sea, the water will become like the coagulated blood of a dead man. All life in the sea will die.

The third angel will pour his bowl upon the rivers and springs, the sources of fresh water, turning them into blood. As a result, those who shed the blood of the followers of Jesus must now drink blood in order to survive.

In verses 5, 6, and 7 John heard voices affirming the correctness of God in turning the waters into blood. The statement by the angel calls attention to the justice of what God was doing. The reason is given in verse 6: "They have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve." The punishment is tailored to fit the crime.

This judgment of God should not be considered as either vengeful or capricious. Judgment is an expression of God's holy and righteous nature. As the holy God, He has an intense hatred of sin. His holy nature requires that He deal with all forms of evil.

John heard a second voice affirming the rightness of God's actions. The altar is personified, as if it was speaking. In previous passages, the corporate testimony of the martyrs was expressed from the altar. Back in chapter 6, "the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained, called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'" (*Revelation 6:9-10*). The prayers of the saints are mentioned again in conjunction with the altar in chapter 8 (*Revelation 8:3-5*). It is likely that the voice from the altar here is that of the martyred followers of Jesus.

This second voice praises God as the Lord God Almighty. This is the title used by the Four Living Creatures, the 24 Elders, and the victorious saints in previous passages (*Revelation 4:8; 11:17; 15:3*). All the creatures in heaven acknowledge that God's judgments against evil are true and just.

In verse 8 the fourth angel pours out his bowl upon the sun, with the result that people are seared by the intense heat. The people recognize that it is God Himself who has overruled the processes of nature and "given power" to the sun. The intensity of the heat is emphasized in the literal translation: the people were "scorched with a great scorching."

The earthdwellers respond to their agonies by blaspheming the name of God. They know that it is God himself who controls the plagues, but they are recalcitrant, refusing to repent and to admit their dependence on Him.

The fifth angel pours out his bowl of wrath directly on the throne of the beast, and a supernatural darkness settles over his kingdom. The beast had been given his throne and authority and power by the devil (*Revelation 13:2*). The supernatural darkness intensifies the distress of the previous plagues and causes such agony that men gnaw their tongues in pain. Once again, it is pointed out that people recognize the hand of God in judgment, but their hearts are adamant; they have no remorse, nor the desire to change their attitudes. At this point, they are one in character with their master, the beast, and his characteristic activity is to blaspheme God and his followers.

There is a specific purpose for the sixth bowl: It will be poured out upon the River Euphrates to dry up the waters, thereby opening a way for the kings from the East. The Euphrates marked the eastern boundary of the land given by covenant to Abraham and his descendants (*Genesis 15:18; Deuteronomy 1:7-8; Joshua 1:3-4*), and in Old Testament times it was a natural protective barrier for Israel.

The specific identities of the kings from the East are not known. However, verse 14 indicates that they are among the kings of the whole world. They will gather for a “show-down” battle “on the great day of God Almighty.” We will learn the details of this battle when we get to chapter 19.

Verses 13 and 14 describe the steps that the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet will take to oppose God. They will send out evil spirits to persuade the kings of the earth to send their military forces into the battle against God. The spirits will perform persuasive miraculous signs. Jesus warned His followers about the false prophets who would arise in the last days to lead people astray by signs and wonders (*Matthew 24:24*). The Apostle Paul wrote of the lawless one whose appearance would be with “signs and lying wonders” and with “the power of evil to deceive.”

“The great day of God Almighty” is when God will complete His acts of retribution toward His evil enemies. It is the day when all the redemptive purposes of God will be consummated, both for salvation and judgment, and for individuals, the Church, and all creation. Verse 16 explains where the big battle will happen. The actual location of “Har-Megiddo” is unknown, although many scholars assume it refers to a plain in northern Israel.

When the seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, there was a loud voice from the throne saying, “It is done! The voice is that of God Himself. There is no more wrath to be poured out. The seven plagues have run their course. Time is on the very threshold of eternity.

Back in chapter 15, we read these words: “with the seven last plagues God’s wrath is completed” (*Revelation 15:1*). “Done” and “completed.” These are incredibly significant words for us. They assure us that God will indeed, some day, accomplish His purposes. Satan will be defeated and our planet will be purged of evil.

The divine proclamation is accompanied by lightnings, voices, thunders, and an earthquake — the same phenomena John had seen in previous visions (*see Revelation 8:5 and 11:19*). This is not unexpected since the climax of each of the series of visions he saw was the end of the age. When the 6th seal was opened, there followed a great earthquake, dramatic cosmic disturbances, and “every mountain and island were moved out of their places” (*Revelation 6:12-14*). Following the 6th trumpet, the temple of God in heaven was opened, and there was lightning, voices, thunders, an earthquake, and hail (*Revelation 11:19-21*). Likewise, the 6th bowl is followed by a great voice from the heavenly temple declaring that God’s purposes have been accomplished, and lightnings, voices, and thunders, along with the all-time greatest earthquake, and a tremendous hailstorm (*Revelation 16:18-21*).

The great earthquake will cause every island to flee away and the mountains to disappear. At the same time, “from the sky, huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men.” These references point to the devastating effects of God’s judgment. The judgments are evidence of God’s hatred of evil and the awesome steps He must take to eliminate evil.

And how tragic that the majority of the human race will die with curses on their lips. In spite of the mercy, patience, and forbearance of God through the centuries, earthdwellers will only have words of hatred for God.

Verse 15 has a special message for believers. It is interjected into the midst of the vision and contains both warning and assurance. God does not want His people to be unduly alarmed by the movements of armies and the intense pressures of the Antichrist at the end of the age. It is Jesus who is speaking in verses 15 and 16, “Behold, I come as a thief.”

It is Jesus who will lead the army of God against the evil enemy forces. For the arrogant, rebellious, and deceived kings of earth, the appearance of Jesus will be unexpected, like “a thief in the night.” However, Jesus wants His followers to be alert and prepared. The kind of preparedness required by Jesus is the kind of spiritual discernment which will see through the deceptive propaganda of Satan and the turmoil of earthly circumstances.

Should the followers of Jesus be surprised when the end comes, they will be like the person who is caught in public with his pants down! Such a person will be shamefully exposed. Jesus is not saying that lackadaisical believers will miss out on His harvest, only that such careless behavior will be the cause of shameful embarrassment. Individuals who have been redeemed by Jesus must always be vigilant and ready for His return.

Back in chapter 3, Jesus warned the church in Laodicea against spiritual poverty and nakedness. He urged the believers to buy “white garments to clothe themselves in order to keep the shame of their nakedness from being seen” (*Revelation 3:18*). According to our passage today, there is a blessing for those who remain faithful in the critical days and hours of the end times. The appeal for the steadfast loyalty of believers is relevant to us. The question we should frequently ask ourselves is, “Are we ready and eager for the Lord Jesus to return.”

Gratuitous Commentary: I want to point out the parallels between this series of Bowl Judgments and the Trumpet Judgments of chapters 8 through 11. In each series, the first four plagues are visited upon the earth, seas, inland waters, and heavenly bodies respectively. The main difference is that the Trumpet Judgments affect only one-third of the world’s population and one-third of the earth (see Revelation 8:7-12). The Bowl Judgments are much more severe. They have a universal impact on every aspect of creation. All the people who had the mark of the beast suffer from the sores; all the seas are turned to blood; all the fresh water sources become blood; and all the people are seared by the heat of the sun; “every living soul dies” (Revelation 16:3); “every island flees away” and none of the “mountains can be found” (Revelation 16:20).

Based on their similarities, it seems obvious that the Trumpets and Bowls series generally run parallel to each other. This means that the events in Revelation should not be interpreted sequentially. John was given the series of visions one after the other, and that is how he recorded them, but the visions themselves overlap. They cover the same time periods although they focus on different aspects of Church history. The sequences of the Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls all lead up to the climatic moment when time and human history will end.