

Session 18 **The Victorious Saints and the Bowls of Wrath** 15:1-16:9

Chapter 15 acts as a bridge to the final cycle of visions – the bowls of wrath, chapter 16.

There are three visions, all of which are in Heaven; each begins with "I saw" v1, 2 or "I looked and behold" v5:

- **Introducing the seven angels with the last seven plagues, v1.**

At this point they are **simply introduced**, but in a way that indicates the importance of their impending activity. They constitute a "**great and marvellous sign**", c.f. 12:1 (a great sign).

The reason for this description is "**for in them the wrath of God is complete**".

They are **agents of the final judgements** that will bring the present age to its conclusion.

- **The victorious saints, v2-4.**

The visions in chapters 12-13 described scenarios of persecution and martyrdom. **From an "earth perspective" it seemed like utter defeat**, 12:13, 13:7, 15-17; **from the perspective of Heaven they were overcomers**, 12:11, 14:12-13.

Prior to the judgements recorded in 14:6-11, and v17-20, the saints are seen enjoying their final destiny, 14:1-5, before the throne of God, c.f. v12. It is **the reward for their faithful endurance**, v13, c.f. 13:9-10.

Here again, in 15:2-4, following the visions of judgements in chapter 14 and before the plague judgements of chapter 16, and the detailed description of the final destruction of Babylon in chapters 17 and 18, John sees **a vision of the glorified saints before the throne of God**, c.f. 7:9-11.

They have had the victory over three things - the beast (persecuting and ungodly political power), **his image** (the demand to worship/give ultimate allegiance to the state/ruler), **and the number of his name** (they resisted economic pressure to comply, preferring want and privation to disloyalty to God). **The promises in the letters to the seven churches were addressed to "those who overcome"**

The symbolism links to 4:6. Here there is an additional element - fire (judgement), 14:10, 18:8, 19:3, 20, 20:9-10, 14-15. Judgement holds no fear for the saints - in fact it is the subject of their song, just as their prayers for vindication have been answered in the judgements, 6:9-11, 8:2-2-6 ff. This concept is foreign to most people - maybe we are too comfortable! Harps are symbolic of joyful celebration and worship, 5:8-10, 14:2. Psalm 149 combines the same features.

Their celebration/worship is prefigured in the Exodus story, v3 c.f. Exodus 14:30 -15: 21.

The final defeat and destruction of **Pharaoh** and his host concluded the sequence of the plagues, as will be the case in Revelation, 15:1b and 15:5-16:21. In the same way **the song of Moses was prophetic of the greater triumph song of (concerning) the Lamb**.

Moses is described as "the servant of God", Num. 12:7, Deut. 34:5, Joshua 2:2. This was a title of honour - he represented God and spoke/acted on His behalf - to oppose/challenge God's servant was equivalent to opposing Him. **John described himself and the recipients of his letter as servants/slaves of Jesus**, 1:1, c.f. 2:20, 7:3, 15, 10:7, 11:18, 19:10, 22:3-4. The same applied to them. **The song of Moses celebrated the acts of God the simultaneously brought deliverance and judgement. The song of the Lamb has the same combined theme. The "two sides of this coin" are the currency of Biblical celebration.**

Two descriptions of God:

- **He is the Lord God Almighty - over all creation. This is how God is often described in Revelation.**
His works are "great and marvellous" . They are about to be revealed by the "plague angels", c.f. v1.
- **He is King of the saints - those who are subjects in His Kingdom, 5:9-10**
His ways are true and just, Deut. 32:3-4.

Three reasons to fear/reverence Him and glorify His name - and the focus of their joyful praise.

- **He alone is holy**, 4:8, 15:8, c.f. Exodus 15:11.
 - **He alone is to be worshipped - all nations**, 5:9-10, 7:9-12.
 - **His judgements have been revealed**, 11:16-18.
- **Commissioning the seven angels with the last seven plagues**, v5-8.

John's introduction is more emphatic - "I looked, and behold ..." c.f. 4:1, 7:9, 14:1, something truly wonderful.

The Heavenly Temple is opened again - entrance into the immediate presence of God. The Temple is described as being the "**Tabernacle of the Testimony**".

The connection is with the Tabernacle in the wilderness and the Ark of the Covenant with the tablets on which the 10 commandments were written by the finger of God. This was the basis of the Covenant between God and Israel - the broken Covenant that resulted in judgement (see Deut. 32:1-43; this is **the other song of Moses**, 31:22-30, 32:44-47).

The earth dwellers have broken faith with the Creator and now a final series of judgements is about to be released.

The agents of judgement are **the seven plague angels, whose appearance reflects the glory and holiness of God**, c.f. 1:13. Their dress is like that worn by priests, Lev. 16:4, 23 and exalted angels in the OT, Ezek. 9:2-3, 11, Dan. 10:5, 12:6-7. They represent God Himself and act at His command and in His place.

The "Living Creatures/Cherubim" now act as intermediaries to the angels of judgement.

They form the inner circle around the throne, 4:6-7. They lead and engage in worship, 4:8b-11, 5:8, 7:11-12, 19:4-5. They sent out the horsemen, 6:1-8. They are supremely concerned for the honour and glory and holiness of God, perhaps functioning as the highest order of creation itself and **remaining utterly devoted to the One who lives forever and ever. This is a major theme in Revelation**, 1:4, 8, 18, 4:8, 5:13, 7:12, 11:17, 16:5, 22:13.

The wrath of God fills the seven golden bowls.

Prior to the trumpet judgements an angel offered incense with the prayers of the saints, 8:3-4 he took fire from the altar and cast it to the earth, using the same censer.

This was an act of worship and the same is true of the golden bowls of wrath.

This is the third cycle of judgements. They do not follow the seals and trumpets in linear time sequence.

Each cycle finishes at the end of the age with God's final judgements on the earth and its inhabitants. There is, therefore, **overlap** between the three cycles but also **differences**:

- **The environment** is targeted in the **trumpets and bowls**.
- There is **increasing severity** through the three cycles – they are characterized as plagues in the final trumpet judgements and in the bowls.
- The first four seals are characteristic of the whole of the "Gospel age" whereas, to some extent, the trumpets and, more especially, **the bowls seem to focus on the period leading up to the end of the age**. This is not exact but is generally the case.
- The **earlier judgements are with a view to repentance. The bowls are a manifestation of the wrath of God** that provokes only blasphemy and cursing, c.f. Pharaoh's hardened heart.

There is an overwhelming sense of God's holiness and majesty and power and glory, now revealed in His wrath, v7-8.

We are uncomfortable with this, but it runs through Scripture, including the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, Matt. 11:20-24, 13: 30, 39-42, 18:7-10, 22:11-14, 23:29-33, 25:41-46. In His patience God has restrained the outpouring of His anger against the godless world, but a time will come when it will overflow in unrestrained wrath, 2Peter 3:7-15 - see 7-9, 15.

Smoke symbolizes the awesome presence of God, Ex. 24:15-16, 13:21, 14:19, 24, 40:34-35, 1Kings 8:10-12, Isaiah 6:3-4.

The glory is so heavy and tangible that it is an exclusion zone until the seven plagues have been completed, v8, and c.f. v1.

It is prefigured in the experience of Israel at Mount Sinai, Ex. 19:16-24. No one can interfere or even intercede during this time of final judgement on the earth, c.f. Jer. 14:11, 15:1.

The Kingdom of God and His Messiah will begin when the judgements have been completed, 11:15-18.

Then Heaven will again be opened, revealing the Temple and the Ark, accompanied by powerful manifestations of God's presence, noises, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake v19.

The seven bowls of wrath are poured out 16:1-21.

No one can enter the temple, but now a loud voice commands the beginning of the process, no doubt the voice of God, v1,

The bowls echo the plagues of Egypt. They are literal and shocking events represented in a symbolic way. We cannot give a precise “newspaper report” type description of what will actually occur but the overall impression is of **overwhelming judgements beyond human power to resist or remedy.**

The bowls come from the Temple – they are sacred vessels portraying the holiness of God. This is explicit in v5-7.

Bowl 1, v2. The loathsome sore, c.f. sixth plague in Egypt, Ex. 9:9-11, c.f. Job 2:1-13, Luke 16:20-21. **The sores are foul and painful. They have accepted the mark of the beast and worshipped his image. This is the judgement counterpart.**

Bowl 2, v3. The sea turns to blood – “It became blood like that of a corpse, so that every living thing died”. It corresponds to the **first plague in Egypt**, Ex. 7:14-21. It is total whereas the second trumpet judgement was partial, 8:8-9. In the context of John’s day this would be the Mediterranean Sea, bringing economic disaster as well as loss of essential food. In other words it is an ecological disaster of overwhelming magnitude, beyond human power to correct; a threat to civilization.

Bowl 3, v4-7. Fresh waters turn to blood. This is total in contrast to the third trumpet judgement, 8:10-11. Again it echoes the first plague in Egypt, c.f. Psalm 78:44. The significance seems to be the same as in Bowl 2. The exact nature of the judgement is not clear but the effects on the rivers are devastating and disastrous and beyond remedy.” Blood” is a suitable symbol - judgement for shedding the blood of the saints and prophets, v6. This is a “quid pro quo”; in Scripture “blood” symbolizes “life”, Lev. 17:10-12, John 6:53-56. **The oppressors of Israel suffer a similar judgement**, Isaiah 49: 17, 21-23, Joel 3:1-3, 14, 19-21

The angel of the third bowl is also called “the angel of the waters”.

In the midst of the judgements he pours out worship in **a declaration of the sovereignty and the righteousness and justice of God**, c.f. 11:16-18, 15:3-4. Three different groups affirm the same truths in the context of God’s final judgements

The third bowl is particularly **appropriate point because it corresponds to the sin of bloodshed** – the taking of life.

The cries of the martyrs underlie this (these) judgements, 6:9-11, 8:3-5, c.f. Matt. 23:29-36, Acts 7:51-60, 1Thess. 2:14-16.

Another angel, from the altar, affirms the first angel’s statement – Amen!

This is challenging. We pray “Your kingdom come ...” Are we prepared for the ultimate answer to our prayers?

Bowl 4, v8-9. Scorching heat. At the 4th trumpet there was partial loss of the sun’s light. Now there is excessive heat that scorches. We live in a very narrow band of tolerable and healthy sunshine. We have

had recent smaller and localized incidents of this. Major sun flares could destroy electronic communications, wreaking havoc on earth. It is beyond our power to prevent or correct such things.

In Revelation Fire is a common motif for judgement, 8:7, 8, 9:17-18, 11:5, 18:18. This is the ultimate warning of eternal fire/judgement, but wilfully ignored, 14:10, 19:20, 20:10, 14-15, 21:8.

In contrast, **the saints are blessed with His eternal protection**, Psalm 121:6, Rev. 7:16.

Mankind has forgotten that we are creatures, contingent on the Creator, v5.

He is the One with power over plagues. They refuse to repent and give Him glory, despite His warnings, 14:6-7.

Thus the earth dwellers reveal the extent of their wickedness – even in their suffering **they blaspheme the Name of God**, in proud defiance. In so doing they side with the beast, 13:6.

Their response affirms the justice and righteousness of God, Rom. 1:18-22.