

REVELATION 16 – THE BOWL JUDGMENTS

A. Bowls directed against natural phenomenon.

1. (1) A voice from the temple.

Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, “Go and pour out the bowls of the wrath of God on the earth.”

a. **Then I heard a loud voice from the temple:** Since no one could enter the temple (Revelation 15:8), this **loud voice from the temple** must be God Himself, who personally initiates the horrific judgment of the bowls.

b. **Go and pour out the bowls of the wrath of God on the earth:** These bowls of judgment are the third woe described in Revelation 11:14. Because they are described as **the wrath of God**, they are chastisements (with the purpose of bringing repentance) as much as punishments (with the purpose of dispensing justice).

i. As such, we usually think of these as occurring at the end of the seven-year period, immediately before Jesus’ return.

ii. Images from Israel’s Exodus are prominent in the bowl judgments. In the days of Moses, God sent plagues upon Egypt that included plagues of boils (Exodus 9:8-12), waters turning to blood (Exodus 7:14-25), and darkness (Exodus 10:21-29).

iii. Are the plagues described in this chapter symbolic? Perhaps we can’t envision all that these words mean. However, God’s judgment of this world will not be a symbolic judgment. We can remember that the reality behind a symbol is always more real – and in this case therefore more terrifying – than the symbol itself.

c. **On the earth:** Those who believe the Book of Revelation is all fulfilled in history have a hard time with this. In Poole's commentary, his suggestions on what **earth** might mean show how difficult it is to make sense of Revelation this way.

- Poole says **earth** might mean some parts of the earth.
- Poole says **earth** might mean the common people.
- Poole says **earth** might mean The Roman Empire.
- Poole says **earth** might mean The Roman Catholic clergy.

i. The point is clear. If **earth** doesn't mean **earth**, then no one can tell what it means, and God may as well not have written it.

2. (2) The first bowl: foul and loathsome sores.

So the first went and poured out his bowl upon the earth, and a foul and loathsome sore came upon the men who had the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image.

a. **A foul and loathsome sore came upon the men who had the mark of the beast:** Those who worshipped the beast and received his **mark** are now marked by God with **loathsome** sores.

3. (3) The second bowl: the sea turned to blood.

Then the second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it became blood as of a dead man; and every living creature in the sea died.

a. **The sea... became blood:** Revelation 8:8-9 described a partial contamination of the sea. Here the contamination is made complete (**every living creature in the sea died**).

b. **Blood as of a dead man:** The sea doesn't necessarily become blood, but **as of** a corpse's blood. It will match the appearance and sickening character of the blood in a dead body.

4. (4) The third bowl: fresh waters polluted.

Then the third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood.

a. **The rivers and springs of water, and they became blood:** This complete contamination is in contrast to the partial (one-third) pollution of fresh waters shown in Revelation 8:10-11.

b. **They became blood:** When these judgments come, the time must be very short until the return of Jesus. With ecological disaster such as this, the human race cannot survive long.

i. "They thirsted after blood and massacred the saints of God; and now they have got blood to drink!" (Clarke)

5. (5-7) The righteousness of God's judgments.

And I heard the angel of the waters saying:

**"You are righteous, O Lord,
The One who is and who was and who is to be,
Because You have judged these things.
For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets,
And You have given them blood to drink.
For it is their just due."**

And I heard another from the altar saying, "Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments."

a. **You are righteous... For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to**

drink: It is completely fitting that those who delighted in shedding the blood of the saints should now be forced to drink **blood**. They refused the Living Water, and now will be given death to drink.

b. **You are righteous, O Lord:** Even in the midst of judgment, it is right that the angel says this. Not only is God's justice fair, it is also pure and appropriate. There is no "vigilante justice" with God.

c. **I heard another from the altar saying:** This voice is either an angel speaking from the **altar**, or the **altar** personified, representing the corporate testimony of the martyrs (Revelation 6:9) and the prayers of the saints (Revelation 8:3-5).

i. This speaking **altar** may be God's altar – the cross, where His greatest sacrifice was made, and which here testifies of His righteous judgment, both in the past and soon to come. This is the altar where God in His love offered a way of escape from these judgments.

6. (8-9) The fourth bowl: the sun scorches men.

Then the fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and power was given to him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat, and they blasphemed the name of God who has power over these plagues; and they did not repent and give Him glory.

a. **The sun, and power was given to him to scorch men with fire:** What is normally taken for granted as a blessing – the warmth of the shining **sun** – is now a curse.

b. **They did not repent and give Him glory:** The failure of men to respond with repentance shows that knowledge or experience of judgment will not change man's sinful condition. Those who are not won by grace will never be won.

i. "The wishful thinking of some that men would repent if they only knew the power and righteous judgment of God is shattered by frequent mention in this chapter of the hardness of the human heart in the face of the most stringent and evident divine discipline." (Walvoord)

B. Bowls directed against the beast and his government.

1. (10-11) Fifth bowl: a plague of darkness.

Then the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom became full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues because of the pain. They blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and did not repent of their deeds.

a. **His kingdom became full of darkness:** Some see this as a symbolic **darkness**. Caird called the last three plagues a "triad of political disaster" – internal anarchy, invasion, and irreparable collapse.

i. But it isn't necessary to see this darkness as a symbolic political darkness. The ninth plague on Egypt was a literal darkness, with spiritual overtones. It could be felt, as described in [Exodus 10:21-22](#).

b. **They gnawed their tongues because of the pain:** The darkness of the fifth bowl is a preview of hell itself, which is described by Jesus as the outer darkness ([Matthew 25:30](#)). Those under the judgment of this fifth bowl stand, as it were, on the shores of the lake of fire.

c. **And did not repent of their deeds:** In man's sinful condition, he increases his sin when under God's judgment, the very time he should forsake his sin.

i. "Judgment may produce a carnal repentance – a repentance that is of the flesh, and after the manner of the sinful nature of men. In this repentance the depravity of the heart remains the same in essence, though it takes another form of showing itself. Though the man changes, he is not savingly changed: he becomes another man, but not a new man. The same sin rules in him, but it is called by another name, and wears another dress. The stone is carved into a more sightly shape, but it is not turned into flesh. The iron is cast into another image, but it is not transformed into gold. This carnal repentance is caused by fear. Does not every thief repent of robbery when he is convicted and sent to jail? Does not every murderer repent of his crime when he stands under the fatal tree?" (Spurgeon)

ii. "This is real penitence, when the man gives glory to the justice of God, even though it condemns him. O my hearer, do you thus repent? Is sin really sinful to you? Do you see its desert of hell? If not, your repentance needs to be repented of." (Spurgeon)

2. (12-16) The sixth bowl: Armies are gathered for a great battle.

Then the sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, so that the way of the kings from the east might be prepared. And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. For they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty. "Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame." And they gathered them together to the place called in Hebrew, Armageddon.

a. **The great river Euphrates:** The Romans considered the **Euphrates** River to be a secure barrier against invasion from the empires of the east. In that day it was 1,800 miles (2,900 kilometers) long and anywhere from 300-1200 yards (275-1,100 meters) wide.

b. **Its water was dried up, so that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared:** If the Euphrates were dried up and made a road, massive armies from the east (nations such as China, India, and Japan) could move westward with ease.

i. Some speculate on the reason these armies of the east come westward. Some think it is to wipe out Israel, or to rebel against a European-based world leader (the Antichrist). Ultimately, they come to do battle against God and His Messiah ([Psalm 2](#)).

c. **I saw three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon:** The spirits are **like frogs** in form. The ancient Jewish people regarded frogs as unclean and repulsive, but the Egyptians revered a frog-goddess.

i. "We can only explain the similitude from the uncleanness, and the pertinacious noise, of the frog." (Alford)

ii. "Christ expelled unclean spirits, but His enemies send them forth." (Swete)

iii. The frogs are "a devastating caricature of the failure of evil. That which men fear most because it appears to be mighty and eternally entrenched becomes at long last only a ridiculous spawning of sickly creatures of the night." (Love)

iv. These demons are like the lying spirit who led Ahab into battle ([1 Kings 22:19-23](#)).

d. **They are spirits of demons, performing signs:** Again, signs and wonders are used by demons as tools of deception. The **false prophet** here is the second beast of [Revelation 13](#).

e. **Gather them to the battle:** This battle is not nation against nation, but the nations against God ([Psalm 2:2](#)). This is one of three important battles mentioned in prophecy.

i. The battle of Gog, Magog and her allies come against Israel (Ezekiel 38 and 39).

ii. The battle of **Armageddon**, when the Antichrist leads the world system against a returning Jesus (Revelation 17:12-16, 17:14, 19:19).

iii. The final battle, when Satan and his allies, after the millennium, make war against God (Revelation 20:7-10).

f. **That great day of God Almighty**: The winner of this battle is apparent. It is the **great day of God**, not the great day of man, not the great day of the Antichrist, not the great day of the dragon.

g. **Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame**: In the midst of the description of the coming battle, there is a warning to be prepared in light of Jesus' assured victory.

i. **Garments** are pictures of spiritual and practical righteousness. We are given the righteousness of Jesus as a garment (Galatians 3:27), but we are also called to "put on" the nature of Jesus in terms of practical holiness (Ephesians 4:20-24). Above all, we must not be "**naked**" – that is, without a covering, or trying to provide our own covering like Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:7), which is like filthy rags in the sight of God (Isaiah 64:6).

h. **And they gathered them together to the place called in Hebrew, Armageddon**: This great battle happens at a place called **Armageddon** (Har-Megiddo).

i. Those who believe the Book of Revelation is all fulfilled in history have a hard time with this battle. "Some say it is the great Valley of the Mississippi. A few years ago some said it was

Sebastopol, or the Crimea. Others think it is France. Whilst many take it as a mere ideal place, for an ideal assemblage, having no existence in fact. To such wild, contradictory, and mutually destructive notions are men driven once they depart from the letter of what is written." (Seiss)

ii. Since there is no specific mount (Har) Megiddo (Megiddo is actually a valley), many see this as a symbolic mountain or hill of slaughter. But Seiss makes a good point: "Whether we take it as the mount or the valley, it makes no difference, for the mount and the valley are counted as one, each belonging to the other."

iii. Megiddo is in a region frequently associated with decisive battles: Deborah over Sisera ([Judges 5:19](#)); Gideon over the Midianites ([Judges 7](#)); Pharaoh over Josiah ([2 Kings 23:29](#); [2 Chronicles 35:22](#)). It is also a place of end-times mourning ([Zechariah 12:11](#)).

iv. The vast Valley of Megiddo has seen tremendous battles through the centuries. Over 200 battles have been fought in the region, from 1468 b.c. (with Pharaoh Tuthmosis III) to 1917 (with Lord Allenby of the British).

v. It is best to see the place as literal, as the region of Megiddo and the valley of Esdraelon. [Revelation 16:14](#), [17:14](#) and [19:19](#) described an organized battle that must center somewhere, even if it extends much further.

vi. "But what is the battle of Armageddon? How ridiculous have been the conjectures of men relative to this point! Within the last twenty years this battle has been fought at various places, according to our purblind seers and self-inspired prophets! At one time it was Austerlitz, at another Moscow, at another Leipsic, and now Waterloo! And thus they have gone on, and will go on, confounding and being confounded." (Clarke)

3. (17-21) The seventh bowl: the final judgments.

Then the seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" And there were noises and thunderings and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake, such a mighty and great earthquake as had not occurred since men were on the earth. Now the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. And great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath. Then every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. And great hail from heaven fell upon men, each hailstone about the weight of a talent. Men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, since that plague was exceedingly great.

a. **It is done:** This announcement, coming from the throne itself tells us that there will be no more delay. In mercy, God has stretched out this scene as much as He possibly could. The seals were followed by trumpets; the trumpets were followed by bowls; but there will be no more judgments upon the earth after this – **it is done.**

b. **Poured out his bowl into the air:** The fact that the bowl is poured into the air may show judgment against the prince of the power of the air (Ephesians 2:2) and his allies.

c. **There was a great earthquake, such a mighty and great earthquake as had not occurred since men were on the earth:** In these final judgments, God shakes the earth with a tremendous earthquake. The same is promised in Hebrews 12:26: Now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven." Yet, what cannot be shaken will remain.

d. **Great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath:** The fall of Babylon (**the great city**) is more explicitly described in Revelation 17 and 18. Here, it is enough to say that God gives her **the cup of the wine of the fierceness** (the ancient Greek word thymos, describing a passionate outburst of anger) **of His wrath** (the ancient Greek word orge, describing a standing state of anger).

i. "The combination of thymos and orge connotes the strongest kind of outpouring of divine judgment." (Walvoord)

e. **Great hail from heaven fell upon men, each hailstone about the weight of a talent:** Giant hailstones fall, weighing up to 100 pounds (45 kilograms). Men responded in utter, unrepentant depravity (**men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail**).

i. **Hail** is frequently a tool of judgment against God's enemies, as seen against Egypt (Exodus 9:24), the Canaanites (Joshua 10:11), apostate Israel (Isaiah 28:2), and Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 38:22).

ii. In each of these instances, **hail** rained down from heaven as a tool of judgment, not as a corrective chastisement of God's own children.

iii. Despite all their suffering, many still will not repent. "I have known people say, 'Well, if I were afflicted I might be converted. If I lay sick I might be saved.' Oh, do not think so. Sickness and sorrow of themselves are no helps to salvation. Pain and poverty are not evangelists; disease and despair are not apostles. Look at the lost in hell. Suffering has effected no good in them. He that was filthy here is filthy there. He that was unjust in this life is unjust in the life to come. There is nothing in pain and suffering

that, by their own natural operation, will tend to purification.”
(Spurgeon)

4. We might say that Revelation 16 is a “great” chapter.

a. It describes great evil: a great city, great Babylon ([Revelation 16:19](#)).

b. It describes great tools of judgment: great heat ([Revelation 16:9](#)), a great river dried up ([Revelation 16:12](#)), a great earthquake ([Revelation 16:18](#)), great hail and great plagues ([Revelation 16:21](#)).

c. It describes a great God: His great voice (loud is the same Greek word for great; verses 1; 17), and His great day of victory ([Revelation 16:14](#)).