

The Book of Revelation

Class 8

Revelation 15 - 16

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Seven Bowls of God's Righteous Judgments

Review: We are seeking to understand the book as a series of parallel visions which describe the church age ("the last days") from the perspective of God's sovereignty over all events, good and evil. We are given a symbolic picture of history as it truly is, with God reigning on his throne, and Jesus as the Lion and the Lamb who administers the purposes of God in history. Each cycle brings us to the grand conclusion of history with the Second Coming of Jesus and the final judgment of God.

The visions describe spiritual conflict as well as God's judgments in history, by which God is ultimately controlling the outcome of history. God's people are weak, small and despised in the world, and yet they are strengthened by their mighty Lord to persevere against the beastly powers of corrupt government. They are also called by their faithful Savior to resist temptation and seduction by the idolatrous attraction of the world.

Themes of Revelation to Keep in Mind in Chapters 15-16:

1. God controls the course of history, which is a great encouragement to suffering saints. He calls them to be faithful, waiting on him for final joy and vindication in God's time.
2. God's present judgments are being revealed in history. They are evidence of God's ultimate sovereignty and providential control of all things. These judgments are precursors of the final judgment and should stand as a warning to those who continue to reject the Lamb and who continue to rebel against God's righteous lordship.
3. God protects his people (even if they are martyred in this life) and continues to bless them with spiritual life and fellowship with himself. In the hardships of the spiritual conflict, they should be encouraged by God's promises of protection and provision.
4. The only right response of God's people is solemn and joyful worship, continued trust in their savior, and continual spiritual warfare in the face of the opposition and seduction of Satan and the world.

Question for thought and discussion: How are these themes applicable to our lives on a daily basis? (Note: we are not finished meditating on God's Word until we are thinking about how it speaks to us today!)

Origin of the seven bowls – in God's plan and in God's heavenly temple (Rev. 15:1-8)

1. The scene recalls God's throne and heavenly worship portrayed in chapters 4 & 5.
2. Symbolism of bowls as representing God's wrath is based in the Old Testament:

Isa. 51:17,22 Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering.....Thus says your Lord, the LORD, your God who pleads the cause of his people: "Behold, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering; the bowl of my wrath you shall drink no more; (See also Jer. 25:15-17; Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 23:31-34; Hab. 2:16)

3. Symbolism is linked to the Exodus:

- Content of Bowls -- **plagues of Egypt**
- **Sea of glass mixed with fire** – compared to the Red Sea
(Frequently in Scripture, the "sea" represents evil. In Revelation, the sea always represents evil and fire represents judgment. "John now sees the chaotic powers of the sea as calmed by the divine sovereignty. Christ's victory through his death and resurrection is what defeated the power of evil and so calmed the devil's watery, tumultuous abode." Here in Rev. 15, the beast is the antitypical replacement of the Egyptian king as the sea monster. (cf. Is. 51:9-11; Ps. 74:12-15)
- The **song of Moses** and the song of the Lamb
(The song is not actually the words of the song of Moses.)
- Those who have been **victorious** over the beast.....
(“The Israelites stood on the far shore of the Red Sea and observed the death of their enemies through God’s power. In the last days, victorious saints likewise stand on the far side of their troubles and the persecution of the beast and sing a song of victory.”)

4. Heavenly temple imagery represents God in his splendor, might, beauty, and holiness

- Seven angels’ “clean, shining linen” – represents **God’s holiness**
- One of the four living creatures gives the bowls – represents that **God originates and controls** the judgments of the bowls
- Smoke (or thick cloud) – frequently **accompanies God’s presence**
(Ex. 19 & 20; Is. 6; Ezek. 1; Ps. 18:8, 11; 74:1)

Note on the meaning of 15:2 – “And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire – and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.”
(cf. Rev. 13:17 “so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name.” Rev. 16:2 “So the first angel went and poured out of his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.”)

These believers in 15:2 are able to participate in the Lamb's victory because of their enduring faith in the midst of persecution and their resistance to compromising their faith with the world.

The image probably alludes to Daniel 3 and the three faithful young men who refused to worship the king's image. It represents all temptations to idolatry.

The mark of the beast is a counterfeit for the seal of God's name on the saints. It is figurative, not literal. A mark denotes spiritual allegiance and ownership.

The number of its name is another way of stating the same thing. Rev. 13:7 reads literally, "the one having the mark, (which is) the name of the beast, or (=that is) the number of his name."

Pouring out the bowls (Rev. 16:1-21)

The bowls are like the trumpets, except that the bowls result in more severe judgments.

The bowls symbolize God's judgments against the ungodly (16:2). These judgments have many manifestations throughout the church age ("last days") including the final crisis leading up to the Second Coming.

The judgments are metaphorical but represent real suffering.

The first five bowls: God punishes the ungodly during the inter-advent age by depriving them of earthly security because of their persecution and idolatry (16:1-11)

First Bowl: God causes suffering for the idolatrous followers of the world system (16:2)

Note: Just as the pouring out of the bowl is figurative and the mark of the beast is figurative, so the effects should be understood as figurative.

Second Bowl: God punishes the world system economically (16:3)

Sea being turned to blood – figurative, at least in part, for the demise of the ungodly world's economic life-support system. (Sea is likely figurative for ungodly humanity)

Blood is figurative not only for death but for suffering in general.

Third Bowl: God punishes the persecutors of his people economically (16:4-7)

Verse 5 – Highlights that the acts of judgment are another demonstration of God's sovereignty over history. (so also verse 7)

Verse 6 – People suffer under the third bowl because they have caused God's people to suffer.

Fourth Bowl: God punishes the ungodly because of their idolatry (16:8-9)

This woe includes suffering involving deprivation of forms of earthly security, likely with an economic focus. (16:8-9 is the reverse of 7:16) See also Is. 49:10 and Deut. 32:24.

The result: hardness, unrepentance, and blasphemy.

Fifth Bowl: God punishes hardened idolaters by causing them to suffer by revealing to them their irremediable separation from him (16:10-11)

Darkness – metaphorical for all ordained events designed to remind the ungodly that their persecution and idolatry are vain, and it indicates their separation from God.

The last two bowls: the final judgment of the evil world system (16:12-21)

Sixth Bowl: God gathers together the ungodly forces in order to punish them decisively at the end of the age (16:12-16)

The final battle is preeminently spiritual in character. (Attempts to correlate it with the maneuvers of particular national armies will miss the point. This is a battle between the servants of God and the enemies of God.)

Seventh Bowl: God punishes the ungodly world system with final judgment (16:17-21)

For Discussion:

1. In light of the bowl judgments, what are some of the key ways that believers should receive encouragement to endure, to persevere, and to keep trusting and following Jesus Christ?

2. If these judgments are constantly being revealed in history by a sovereign God and affecting nations and peoples, how are we to understand that believers are not recipients of God's judgments?

3. How does it help us to know God's ultimate judgments on the worldly systems and seductions of this present age?