

THE SEVEN BOWL JUDGMENTS

Revelation 15-16

Chapters 12-14 have revealed personalities and events of the middle of the seven-year Tribulation. The Antichrist will come to power. The False Prophet will be advancing worship of the Antichrist through the image and the mark. Violent persecution of the Jews will break out with a remnant of Jews kept safe by God in a city of refuge. Followers of Jesus Christ will find themselves enemies of the state subject to arrest and execution.

Chapters 15 & 16 now resume the chronological sequence of Tribulation events. God's wrath against the counterfeit Trinity and its followers will reach its zenith in the form of the seven Bowl Judgments.

PRELUDE TO THE SEVEN BOWL JUDGEMENTS (15:1-8)

The Sign in Heaven (15:1)

Revelation 15:1 (ESV)

¹ *Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished.*

The visions of chapter 15 are a prelude to the seven Bowl Judgments. The number seven emphasizes the perfect righteousness and completion of God's righteous judgments. As will come clear in chapter 16, these seven plagues are the seven Bowl Judgments. John states they are the "last". The Greek literally reads "seven plagues, the last ones". This construction makes clear that these are the last of God's Tribulation judgments and that the Seal Judgments (6:1-17; 8:1-5) and Trumpet Judgments (8:6-9:21; 11:15-19) were also plagues. The term "plagues" reminds us of the 10 Plagues with which God struck Egypt.

When executed, these seven plagues are said to "finish" God's wrath. "Finished" translates a verb meaning "to complete, bring to an end" in amount, number, degree, effect or purpose. When the last of these plagues is accomplished, God's righteous anger and punishment of the counterfeit Trinity and rebellious mankind will be fully accomplished.

John next sees Tribulation martyrs praising God before His throne.

The Martyred Tribulation Saints (15:2-4)

Revelation 15:2-4 (ESV)

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. ³ And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,*

"Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! ⁴ Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."

That these are martyred Tribulation saints is made clear by those things which they conquered: the beast, its image and its number. By faith, these believers refused to worship the Antichrist and his image and they refused to take the mark and they were killed as a result. The Antichrist will think he has conquered by killing his enemies, but, in fact, they have defeated him. Death for a believer is a wonderful victory (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

The pain and suffering of the Antichrist's persecution will give way to eternal rest and joy. Given harps, these saints worship God singing a song that is said to be both the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. Two songs of Moses are recorded in Scripture (Exodus 15, Deut. 32), but the relationship of the this song to the two songs of Moses is unclear. Also, to what the song of the Lamb refers is unclear. So some scholars speculate the reference to Moses indicates this throng of martyred Tribulation saints will include Messianic Jews while reference to the Lamb refers to the Gentile believers.

If these saints have been killed for refusing to worship the image of the Antichrist and refusing to take his mark, this indicates that a significant period of time has passed since the inauguration of these programs at the mid point of the Tribulation. And if the vision of these martyred Tribulation saints is a prelude to the Seven Bowl Judgments, this indicates the Bowl Judgments are poured out well into the second half of the Tribulation. The exact timing cannot be fixed with precision, but these observations would seem to support a point well into the second half of the seven year Tribulation.

At this point in the Greek text, a new paragraph begins with the phrase **kai meta tauta**, “after these things”. This phrase indicates we are once again picking up the chronological sequence of Tribulation events. Remember, chapters 10:1 – 11:4, 13-14 and 17:1-19:10 are interludes and do not advance the Tribulation events chronologically. Beginning with 15:5, we are once again advancing the chronological sequence of Tribulation events. This begins with a vision of the heavenly tabernacle and the glory of God.

The Seven Angels with the Seven Bowls (15:5-8)

Revelation 15:5-8 (ESV)

⁵ After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, ⁶ and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. ⁷ And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever, ⁸ and the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

The language seems to indicate these seven angels emerge from the inner sanctuary of the heavenly tabernacle; from the place we know as the Holy of Holies. They are emerging from the presence of God the Father having been prepared to carry out His final and most devastating Tribulation judgments. That God is righteous and just in executing these judgments is symbolized in the pure, bright linen garments of the angels – the linen symbolizing righteousness in action (19:8). The golden sashes and the golden bowls symbolize God’s glory. The fact they are proceeding forth from the Holy of Holies symbolizes the outpouring of God’s perfect justice and wrath upon the world for rejecting Christ. As one author expresses it: *Here the veil is pulled back, not to let man in, but to pour out God’s justice.*¹

The smoke of God’s glory and power will fill the heavenly tabernacle preventing entry into it until God’s wrath is completed. The seven Bowl Judgments really will be the wrath of God poured out. At this point, God is angry and no one can come near Him until His holy character and righteousness are fully satisfied. It is as the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 76:7,

Psalm 76:7 (ESV)

⁷ But you, you are to be feared! Who can stand before you when once your anger is roused?

THE SEVEN BOWL JUDGMENTS (16:1-21)

First Bowl Judgment: Ulcerous sores (16:1-2)

Revelation 16:1-2 (ESV)

¹ Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.” ² So the first angel went and poured out 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.

The first Bowl Judgment will cause ulcerous sores to break out upon all those who have taken the mark of the Antichrist. As mentioned earlier, this would seem to indicate that some time has passed since the inauguration of the worldwide campaign of the mark (Rev. 13:16-18). This might place the time of the Bowl Judgments in the final quarter (last 21 months) of the Tribulation or even later. Most commentators understand the Bowl Judgments to be poured out in rapid succession.

¹ Hampton Keathley III, *Studies in Revelation*, Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C., 1997, p.276.

The same word is used here as in the Greek Old Testament for the boils God inflicted upon the Egyptians (Exod. 9:8-12). As we will see in the fifth Bowl Judgment, these sores will persist for a time.

Second Bowl Judgment: Sea turned to blood (16:3)

Revelation 16:3 (ESV)

³ *The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea.*

The second Bowl Judgment will turn the waters of the seas to blood. The second Trumpet Judgment resulted in 1/3 of the sea becoming blood. The second Bowl Judgment will cause all the waters of the sea the world over to become blood. This is what was meant by the angelic preacher when he warned the earth's inhabitants that anyone who takes the mark of the Antichrist will "drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger..." (14:9-11). Hard to imagine the stench and the tremendous food supply problems this will cause.

The Third Bowl Judgment: Fresh water turned to blood (16:4-7)

Revelation 16:4-7 (ESV)

⁴ *The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood.* ⁵ *And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, "Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments."* ⁶ *For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!"* ⁷ *And I heard the altar saying, "Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!"*

The third Bowl Judgment will result in the fresh water supply from rivers and springs becoming blood. It is interesting to discover that there is an angel who is in charge of the fresh water. He vindicates God's judgment: the blood thirsty enemies of God will be given blood to drink. In verse seven John writes he "heard the altar saying" probably meaning the angel who has charge of the fire upon the altar (14:18).

The Fourth Bowl Judgment: Scorching heat from the sun (16:8-9)

Revelation 16:8-9 (ESV)

⁸ *The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire.* ⁹ *They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory.*

The fourth Bowl Judgment will cause the heat of the sun and scorch those with the mark of the Antichrist. Unfortunately, the ESV fails to translate the definite article before "people": the Greek text reads, "it was allowed to scorch *the men*" which is a reference to the men of verse two – those who had taken the mark of the Antichrist. I believe this verse indicates that the remnant of Jews protected in the city of refuge (12:14) and those following Christ will miraculously be spared this plague as well as the next. Those suffering this plague curse God and do not repent; hardly responses we would expect from believers.

In addition to the personal suffering the sun will cause, there will be tremendous affects on the polar ice caps, sea levels, evaporation and weather systems.

The Fifth Bowl Judgment: the Antichrist's kingdom plunged into darkness (16:10-11)

Revelation 16:10-11 (ESV)

¹⁰ *The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish* ¹¹ *and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds.*

The fifth Bowl Judgment will plunge the Antichrist's kingdom into total darkness. Believers and the Jewish Remnant will once again be spared reminding us that God plunged Pharaoh's kingdom into darkness, but Israel had light (Exod. 10:21-23). Notice that in the cases of the fourth and fifth plagues, the people know these plagues are coming from God, but they refuse to repent.

The Sixth Bowl Judgment: the Euphrates River dried up (16:12-16)

Revelation 16:12–16 (ESV)

¹² The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east. ¹³ And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. ¹⁴ For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. ¹⁵ (“Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!”) ¹⁶ And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

The sixth Bowl Judgment results in the great Euphrates River being dried up. This will make it easier for the allied armies of the Antichrist to assemble at Armageddon in Israel. Demonic envoys from the counterfeit trinity will persuade the allies of the Antichrist to mobilize their armies and assemble at Armageddon. What has been typically called “the Battle of Armageddon” is in fact a military campaign, a number of battles stretching the length of Israel. No battle is fought at Armageddon. Armageddon will be a staging area much like England was the staging area for Allied forces before D-Day.

Verse 15 is a warning to the Tribulation saints living in the days of the Bowl Judgments. To “stay awake” refers to alertness and staying in fellowship with Jesus. “Keeping his garments on” refers to the righteous deeds, the good works, which the believer wears as a garment. In other words, these deeds are what others can see with their eyes. They cannot see the imputed righteousness of Christ possessed by the believer, but they can see the affect in the believer’s righteous deeds. A believer walking in the flesh/world is “naked” in that his life does not reflect the righteousness of Christ. His appears to be an empty profession, certainly hypocritical. Jesus promises a blessing to those Tribulation saints who remain in fellowship with Him and continue to serve Him.

The Seventh Bowl Judgment: a great earthquake and hailstones (16:17-21)

Revelation 16:17–21 (ESV)

¹⁷ The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, “It is done!” ¹⁸ And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake. ¹⁹ The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath. ²⁰ And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found. ²¹ And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people; and they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe.

The seventh Bowl Judgment will bring the largest magnitude earthquake ever experienced in human history and a shower of massive hailstones. With this plague, the Bowl Judgments will be complete. It is interesting to note that the term “great” is used seven times in these five verses. With this seventh and final plague God’s wrath reaches its zenith and is fulfilled.

This earthquake will radically alter the earth’s topography. What city will be split in three parts is not known for certain. For a variety of reasons Jerusalem, Rome and Babylon have all been suggested. I lean toward the rebuilt city of Babylon as the city in view. Again, verse 21 indicates those with the mark of the Antichrist will suffer the plague of the hailstones while believers will be spared.

REFLECTION

Though from the contemporary point of view all the details of these dramatic judgments are not immediately understood, the unmistakable impression of the Scriptures is that the whole world is being brought to the bar of justice before Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords. There is no escape from divine judgment except for those who avail themselves of the grace of God in that day by faith in Jesus Christ. The utter perversity of human nature, which will reject the sovereignty of God in the face of such overwhelming evidence, confirms that even the lake of fire will not produce repentance on the part of those who have hardened their hearts against the grace of God.²

² John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Galaxie Software, 2008), 241–242.