

What do we Know from the Seven Bowls?

Revelation 15:4 – 16:21

Turn in your Bibles to Revelation 15.

Here's how I study the Bible to prepare sermons. My main method takes three words to describe: read it again. At the beginning of the week I make sure I know which Scripture we're doing, and then I read it again. Think a bit, then read it again. If something confuses me, I will check a commentary. Commentaries solve problems, but they don't give you a feel for the text.

So, read it again. The first few times I read it, I'm thinking what I believe, and what I want and need. So I read it again and again. I find out this Scripture is answering questions I'm not answering. It may say things I don't believe, but I don't find that out until I've read it through quite a few times.

I went to school a long time, to learn from others who treat the Bible like this, and I could not do this without my education. And I use books written by others who also want to know what questions this part of the Bible wants to answer. But 80% of my time is just reading it again. Because the important things get a little clearer every time. Read it again. Now to Revelation.

The book of Revelation is a message from God given in symbols. John had different visions of symbols: lampstands, a woman, a lamb, a dragon, a beast, a scroll, and so on.

This is not as confusing as we think it is. We keep asking questions that the vision does not answer, so we are lost. So today we will try something different. I am going to read right through the account of the seven bowl judgments, beginning to end.

As I read, listen and learn. Try to ignore your questions and curiosity. Do your best to come up with a list of things you know for sure. What DO we know from this? We can be pretty sure about a lot, and it is all out in the open in this section. We will focus on that.

Once the reading is over, we'll talk about what we know, what is obvious to all of us from these seven symbolic judgements. And in the response time, just for today, we will not ask questions, or wonder about things. We will only respond to what's clear.

I'll read. Much is clear here. Figure out what it is.

15:1 I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God's wrath is completed....

⁵ After this I looked, and I saw in heaven the temple—that is, the tabernacle of the covenant law—and it was opened. ⁶ Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They

were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. ⁷ Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. ⁸ And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

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

² The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly, festering sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.

³ The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead person, and every living thing in the sea died.

⁴ The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood.

⁵ Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say:

“You are righteous in these judgments, O Holy One, you who are and who were;

⁶ for they have shed the blood of your holy people and your prophets,

and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.” And I heard the altar respond:

“Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are your judgments.”

⁸ The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was allowed to scorch people with fire. ⁹ They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him.

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 agony ¹¹ and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.

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 Then I saw three impure spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. ¹⁴ They are demonic spirits that perform signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.

¹⁵ “Watch, I come like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, and remains clothed, so as not to go naked and be shamefully exposed.”

¹⁶ Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

¹⁷ The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, “It is done!” ¹⁸ Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since mankind has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. ¹⁹ The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. ²⁰ Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found.

²¹ From the sky huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds, fell on people. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible.

So, what do we know? God is in what kind of mood? He’s angry.

How angry is he? He’s very angry, furious.

With whom is he angry? He's angry with certain people. Those who won't glorify God, and who refuse to change how they live. People who worship the beast, and take his mark. Those who attack God's children. (16:2, 6, 9, 11)

Do we learn where the wrath of God comes from, where it originates?

Yes, it comes from God's most inner presence, from his temple in heaven, his tabernacle, his throne. The door to this temple is opened. The seven angels carrying the seven bowls come out of the opened temple. They are dressed like priests. Even the four living ones are outside this inner temple.

The glory and power of God are so thick in his holy inner temple, so dense, and concentrated, that no heavenly beings can enter until the seven angels have all poured out their bowls. None of the heavenly beings normally around God can be in his presence at this time. He is in his heavenly Holy of Holies, and no one else can be in there.

That means that this furious wrath pours out of something lodged deep in the holiness of God himself. It comes out of his presence in the Holy of Holies.

God created and loved the whole human race, and blessed it from Creation on. He fed and clothed all people, protected humans and made sure they filled the earth. He sacrificed his one and only Son to bring people back to him. And on the whole, the human race will not give God credit, it ignores him and his ways, wants no part of him or his Son. So God is angry.

How is God showing his anger? He sending a series of painful plagues on people.

On all people? No, on those who will not worship him or change their ways.

Do these people know that these plagues are coming from God? Yes, they do. (16:9, 11, 21)

Does God seem open to their repentance? Does it seem that if they changed their ways he would stop sending these plagues?

Yes, it does seem that way. It seems that if they changed what they were doing, God would change what he is doing.

Do the people who are experiencing God's anger, and know their suffering comes from him, seem open to changing, to repenting? Are they at all ready to changing their ways?

No, not at all.

Does their suffering soften? Are they at least reconsidering their actions?

No, their pain makes them harder against God and more angry at him. (16:9, 11, 21)

We need to pay attention here. We assume that if God causes people enough pain and suffering as punishment for their rebellion, then of course they will want to repent, they will want to change their minds and be forgiven and worship him and live with him.

The bowl judgments say: absolutely not! Three times in our text we read that people understood what was happening to them, and they always cursed God and refused to repent. (16:9,11,21)

Whatever hell is, it is NOT filled with people who want a second chance, who want to turn to God and live with him. No, they want no part of him, they are getting angrier, they curse him. They do not like their pain, but they want no part of God.

How do God's faithful servants respond to all this? They worship God and praise him.

Really? Do they praise him because he is pouring out his wrath? No. Why do they worship God? The angel worships God because God's judgements are righteous, and God is holy.

Do we hear anything from the altar, which is the prayers of the saints?

Yes the voices of the altar say that God's judgments are righteous and true.

When we first heard from the saints at the altar, in the fifth seal, they said, "how long, Almighty God, holy and true, until you judge the people who attacked us?" Now we read "holy and true" again, because their prayer is being answered. God's judgements are holy and true.

People get angry. Anger is not necessarily a problem. There are wrong reasons to get angry, and also good reasons to get angry. Anger itself is not wrong. But when we pour out our anger in speech or actions, no one says we are holy and true and righteous, because we are not any of those things. When we pour out our anger, it is evil.

The reason for our anger may be good, but we need to be very careful about what we do with our anger, and when we are angry we are not careful at all.

But God's anger is not like ours. When God pours out his wrath, God is holy and his judgments are righteous and true. When God pours out his furious wrath, he is acting entirely in line with what he has been saying and doing all along. God's wrath is entirely consistent with the character of God that we have always seen. God's anger is not like ours, we must remember this.

Do the particular plagues remind us of any famous OT story? Yes, the plagues on Egypt in the book of Exodus. Three times called "plagues" (Rev 15:1, 6; 16:21), painful sores, water turned to blood, frogs, darkness, death, and hail.

Were the plagues on Israel's enemies good news for God's people?

Yes, God had seen Israel's misery, and had heard their cries, and was taking them to a good and spacious land. They did not ask for plagues on their enemies. They just wanted an easier life. But God had a bigger plan, and the plagues on their enemies was part of that.

Based on these seven bowls, how does human history end? Can we say anything about that?

Yes. There seem to be four stages in these seven bowl judgments.

First stage is the first five bowls. God sends plagues, painful punishments on those who refuse him. The bowls are doing what we've seen half a dozen times in Revelation, they are covering the whole time between the first and second comings of Christ.

John's seven churches in the first century were in this first stage, and we are in the first stage. God gives humans the painful consequences of their rebellion against him.

Second stage comes in the sixth bowl, the gathering of all people for war against God. This is probably still future. A great river dries up, so people gather. Then the lies of the dragon and the beast and the false prophet fool the whole world, and the kingdoms of the world gather for war.

Revelation 19 and 20 describe this same scene, and the war is against the camp of God's people, the city his loves, that would be us who say Christ is Lord, and obey God's commands.

So in the sixth bowl there is a great gathering based on a great deception. God now puts some limits on people being deceived. That will end, and the human race that does not worship God will gather together for war on God and his people.

It seems that our unbelieving neighbours, who are kind and friendly, who don't seem nearly as bad as Scripture often describes them, will change and become violent enemies. Jesus spoke of this, brother turning against brother, parents and children against each other. A person's enemies will be those in their own household (Matthew 10). That's the second stage.

Third stage, the Lord comes like a thief. The Lord breaks into John's report to speak to us directly – did you catch that? 16:15 - *Look, I come like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and remains clothed, so as not to go naked and be shamefully exposed.*

Staying clothed means refusing to compromise with the world, refusing to worship any other than God and the Lamb. Jesus is telling us that at this point, the great gathering against God, there will be pressure to turn away from God. Don't do it, the Lord says. Endure, stay faithful.

Jesus always said that his 2nd coming would be a surprise. We don't want to be surprised, we want so badly to know when. Jesus always said, it will surprise to everyone. The answer is not to figure out when he's coming. The answer is to stay ready, always live faithfully.

God's people are not taken out before this. But at this point I expect we have what's called the rapture. Right at the End, right before God's final judgment on earth, the Lord will come like a thief, the dead in Christ will rise first, then we who remain and are alive will be caught up with him in the air.

This was already covered in Revelation 14:14-16, the first harvest of the Son of Man, in the sixth scene of Holy War. The third and fourth stages in the bowl judgments are the same as the two harvests in the sixth scene of Holy War.

Fourth stage, the seventh bowl, comes right after the Lord's return. God shows up, the heavens are rolled up, God judges rebellious humanity, human history as we know it since creation comes to an End. This would be the second harvest of the sixth scene of Holy War, 14:17-20, the great winepress of God's wrath, because earth's grapes are ready.

The seventh bowl is a lot like the sixth seal, back at the end of Rev 6. Both have a great earthquake, islands and mountains wandering all over the place, the heavens open up, and all people know that the ultimate day of God's wrath has arrived. So the bowls are taking us on a sequence we've seen several times before.

This how life as we know it on this planet will end. The rebellion against God will increase, and finally God will say, "It's finished, it's done, it's over." Just before he does that, Jesus will come and gather his elect from the four corners of the earth (Mark 13:26-27).

Let's keep two things clear. One, God's people have nothing to fear from the wrath of God. Nothing. 1 Thess 1 – *You turned from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son Jesus, who saves us from the coming wrath.*

We are nervous about the dragon and the beast, that's fine, they are a problem, but we have nothing to fear from God's wrath.

Two, remember that this wrath of God is God answering the prayers of the saints in front of him. They watch this all, and worship and praise him. This is good news for us, like God rescuing Israel from their enemies. When it is over, we will praise and worship him with all our might. So let's stay faithful. He's on his way!

Amen.

Let's pray together. Repeat after me: (Let's kneel, if your legs will allow that).

*Our Father, whose throne is the heavens and whose footstool the earth,
May your holy name be honoured,
May your kingdom come,
May your will be done,
May earth be just like heaven.
Give us each day our daily needs.
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Don't lead us into testing or temptation,
We don't do well.
Rescue us from evil and the evil one,
We need your help.
You are the king, and you have the power,
So yours be the glory. Amen.*