

## Revelation 15 & 16

### Getting Started

Having taken time to carefully outline the reasons why the churches are suffering, and why God must judge the earth in Ch.12-14, John now returns in Ch. 15-16 to detail for the churches the final judgement cycle – the bowls of wrath. There are a number of features in this judgement cycle that we want to pay attention to, one is the place of the action, second is the wrath of God, third is the song of Moses, and fourth is Armageddon.

### The core:

#### 1. Place of the action.

Please note that all three judgement cycles begin in the same place, in the same attitude - worship. The scroll judgement begins in God's throne room (Ch. 4 & 5), the trumpet judgement begins at the altar with an angel holding golden censer (Ch.8:3-5), and the final bowl judgement begins in the temple of the tabernacle of testimony ((15:5).

These all serve to remind the churches and affirm over and over again with them that God is sovereignly overseeing the judgments that proceed.

#### 2. The wrath of God.

John sees something in this final cycle of judgement that most people don't like to consider or talk about. John says that the 7 angels

**"Had seven plagues, which are the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished." (Rev.15:1)**

John refers to the word "wrath" 13X in Revelation. Over half of the references to wrath occur between Chapters 14 & 16. John's been building the concept of God's wrath in Revelation starting with 6:16, 17 regarding the wrath of the Lamb toward the unrepentant of the earth. From this it seems that each judgement cycle expresses anew God's wrath on the earth as the cycles progress. See the references to God's wrath in 11:18; 12:12; 14:8, 10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 18:3; with the final reference in 19:15.

What is the wrath of God? Tony Evans provides an easy to understand definition,

**"The wrath of God is his response to that which in its essence is against his nature."**

God's nature is holy. He is perfect. What stands against God's nature is sin. Because God is holy sin cannot stand in his presence without his response to it. The Bible clear on this.

**For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. Because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, being understood by what has been made, so that they are without excuse. Rom. 1:18-20**

Humanity has always had a problem with God's wrath. It is often thought that God's wrath is cruel. As Evans also notes, "People think God gets mad the way people get mad."

This is a poor way to think about God's wrath. More correctly as J I Packer observes, God's wrath is always Judicial. God is a judge administering justice. Each one judged receives exactly what they deserve. God's wrath isn't cruel. Justice is served.

What is unique about the bowls of God's wrath in Revelation is that each judgement bowl expresses God's final wrath, his final work of justice on sin and rebellion. Everything has been building to this climactic point. In fact Ch. 14 ends with the son of man (Jesus), and an angel each, in turn, swinging a sickle of harvest on the earth. 14:14-16 represents the harvest of believers, and 14:17-20 represents the harvest of unbelievers. It's the second harvest that is most graphic and brutal. Unbelievers are gathered as clusters of grapes who are thrown into ". . . the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood came out from the winepress. . . "(14:19-20).

In chapter 15 & 16 we see the wrath of God bringing justice on unrepentant sin and rebellion. And the picture John paints is horrific as each of the first 5 bowls of God's wrath are poured out. And the response of unrepentant humanity is shocking.

**Take special note of Bowl three (V.4-7).** In Rev 5 the martyrs under the altar cried out, "how long?" Here in 16:6 God answers the plight of his people. When the persecutors attacked the saints and prophets because of Jesus, they believed themselves above accountability. Here they are held accountable and they are made to drink the very blood they spilled. Of interest here is the direction the judgement takes. The bowl of wrath is poured out "into the rivers and springs." It doesn't take much to realize the value of fresh water. It is both a commodity which we need, and it is a way for us to transport goods from one place to another. In the days of Rome water was the primary means of transport and commerce over great distance. By pouring out his wrath on the waters God is directly touching the life blood of the Ancient world. V. 5-7 highlights the very thought J I Packer expressed about God's wrath earlier.

**And I heard the angel of the waters saying, "Righteous are you, the One who is and who was, O Holy One, because you judged these things; for they poured out the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. They deserve it." And I heard the altar saying, "Yes, Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are your judgments."**

### **3. The song of Moses and of the Lamb**

John also mentions the Song of **Moses**, and the temple of the **tabernacle of testimony**. These are references to the Exodus story. John seeks to have the churches remember and apply afresh in their setting the familiar story of Moses, Egypt, and Pharaoh.

Here's the question: why link the events of the Exodus (1400 BC) with God's final judgement and Rome? There are several parallels to consider.

### **Rome's national agenda:**

The church, like Israel in Egypt (Ex.1:8-10), was a growing threat in a foreign land. Their presence and increasing numbers were possibly seen as a subversive threat to Rome's vision for its own people. At first Rome, as Egypt, dealt with God's people less harshly, but remember, God's people were committed to the exclusive worship of God (Rev 1:5, 6), and the vision of Christ as the Ancient of Days (1:12-16). And, as one historian suggests, Rome began to view Christians with suspicion. Some of their rituals were viewed as cannibalism and incest. In other cases the Christians' refusal to sacrifice to the emperor was considered high treason. In Egypt, the refusal of the midwives to kill all male Jewish babies was probably seen as an act of treason against Pharaoh (Ex.1:8-22).

Christianity countered Rome's agenda of unifying their lands under the Roman banner. Rome was in charge. It set the rules. To allow the Christians to worship God exclusively would directly compete with how Rome saw things.

### **Rome's spiritual environment:**

As well, the churches lived in a hostile spiritual environment not unlike Israel in Egypt. Rome was encrusted with idolatry and pagan worship. It was dominated by temples to myriads of gods that impacted every aspect of life from weather, to relationships, to fertility, to economic, political, and military issues, to life itself. These pagan gods were a complete affront to the God who created the heavens and the earth.

### **Rome's Powerful leaders:**

In Egypt Pharaoh was god. His word was final. The Caesars were not gods in the same sense, although they too were intimately connected with the gods, and their rule was grounded in divinely sanctioned authority. The point is that the lives of Christians were regulated by those who did not recognize, or heed God. In a very real sense, Rome/Caesar were acting like Egypt's Pharaoh. Rome's restrictions on how Christians practiced their faith hampered their functioning in their true spiritual roles in exclusive obedience to, and worship of, God alone. In Asia Minor there was no freedom to worship God as God instructed his people. God's people here, like Egypt long ago, were in bondage. Under the hand of harsh task masters, the churches must choose how to react to their surroundings. And as Rev 16 points out, God deals with those who prevent his people from fulfilling their destiny as priests serving and worshipping him in dramatic fashion.

### **The power struggle between God, Pharaoh, and Rome:**

John came to God's people, as did Moses in his day, reminding them that God was not aloof, nor deaf, to their plight. He reminds them that God's angels pour out his wrath upon the earth like he did on Egypt. Although ten plagues fell upon Egypt (Ex 7-11) and seven bowls of wrath appear here, the point is the same. I suspect that if John rose in the presence of the Caesars, as did Moses in Pharaoh's presence, declaring a call for God's people to be released and free to worship God, Rome's response would have been similar to Pharaoh,

**“Who is the LORD that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and besides, I will not let Israel go.” (Ex 5:2).**

Every element that Rome attributed to one or another pagan god’s control here in Rev 16 bows before the living God of heaven. It is God alone who controls and judges these things. William Barclay provides a perspective,

**“In this final series of terrors John seems to have gathered together the horrors from all the stories of the avenging wrath of God and to have hurled them on the unbelieving world in one last terrible deluge of disaster.”**

Exodus (Ex 7-11)	Trumpets ( Rev 8-11)	Bowls (Rev 16)
Water into blood	Hail, fire, blood	Ulcerous sores
Frogs	Flaming mountain	Sea turns to blood
lice	Bitter water (wormwood)	Rivers, fountains turn to blood
Flies	Sun, moon darkened	Sun scorchingly hot
Plague on cattle	Abyss, smoke, locusts	Darkness
Boils and sores	Demonic cavalry	Euphrates dries up
Thunder and hail	Final victory	Polluted air, thunder, earthquakes lighting, hail
Locusts		
Darkness		
Slaying of first born		

Of all that John discusses in Chs. 15 & 16, we will focus on the song of Moses and the Lamb, Three of the bowl judgement elements, and Armageddon.

**The song of Moses and the Lamb (V.3-4)**

**15:3-4 the Song of Moses and the Lamb**

John makes an interesting comment in 15:3 often overlooked,

**“And they sang the song of Moses, the bond servant of God, and the song of the Lamb saying . . .”**

Most of us are unfamiliar with the song of Moses in **Ex. 15:1-18**. It celebrates God’s wondrous defeat of Pharaoh’s Egyptian armies. Included in this celebration is Moses’ other song in Deut 32. Together these two passages extol God’s greatness. At the center of Moses’ songs is God’s power, majesty, and ability to save his people from the powers that threaten and oppress them. Nahum Sarna observes,

**“It (The Song of Moses) is not an epic narrative but a spontaneous, lyrical outpouring of emotion on the part of the people who experienced the great events of the Exodus. The poem assumes that the audience is familiar with the course of events; there is no need, therefore, to repeat the pertinent facts, and there is considerable telescoping and condensation.”**

In other words main point of the song of Moses is God’s faithfulness to his promises and his

protection of his people. In the beginning of Exodus God's people cry out to him in their suffering. At the end, they sing his praises. Added to this is the song of the Lamb which is given in 15:3, 4. While the songs are not identical, they make the same powerful point. Metzger notes,

**"Both celebrate deliverance from deadly danger."**

What purpose do these songs serve regarding the churches of Revelation? Given their spiritual state in Ch. 2 & 3, it's not unreasonable to think that some abandoned their singing while others may have sung their songs half-heartedly. Reminding them of the song of Moses and the Lamb was probably meant to spark in them a renewed sense of victory.

Again, as Metzger points out,

**The song expresses confidence that all nations will be led to worship the one true God, because they will acknowledge the justice of what he has done in vindicating his people.**

Songs can speak powerfully into our life when all seems doomed. Songs have been used to help believers reframe their thinking in times of deep distress so they see beyond the present difficulty to the real source of hope that is their anchor – God Himself.

**Bowl six (V.12).** If the imagery of the Exodus is consistent here the beast and his kingdom and followers face an ominous prospect. Unlike the Exodus and Red Sea through which God carved a path of dry land for Israel to cross and escape Pharaoh's pursuing army, here the Euphrates dries up completely. Craig Keener points out that the Euphrates was the only one among the great rivers in that region that never dried up. John's point is that no world power, whether Egypt, Babylon, Rome, or anyone else can resist God's far reaching hand.

#### **4. Armageddon**

Each judgement cycle has featured an interlude to which the churches to pay attention. In the scroll judgement the first interlude featured the sealing and victory of God's people. In the trumpet judgement second interlude involved the strong angel, the eating of the scroll and the death and resurrection of the two witnesses. Now in this third judgement cycle Armageddon steps up.

(V.16)

Carrying on the dragon/beast's war against God, we come to the place of showdown. Apparently the dragon and the beast are bound and determined to mount an incredible assault on God in one final meeting. Much has been made of this place in Israel. The Hebrew term is (Har) Mount (Megiddon) Megiddo. In reality it is not a true "mount". The nearest mountain would be the Carmel Mountain (Elijah) just to the west. Megiddo is a large hill, in also called a "Tel" (archeological term). It's the built up layered remains of numerous

civilizations that have occupied the site. As one people conquered another Megiddo would be flattened and rebuilt. Archeologists have identified at least seven different civilizations at Megiddo.

Rev 16:16 is not the only place that Har Megiddon is mentioned. Josiah died there by the hand of Pharaoh Neco (2 Kings 23:28), and Deborah sings of this place in Judges (Jdgs. 5:19). Over the Millennia Megiddo has seen many decisive battles fought there. It is a strategic location. It occupies the crossroads of two major routes through Israel toward Jerusalem. This makes it valuable. Megiddo is all about control. Perhaps this is why John mentions that the false prophets (directed by the demons) gather the kings together here for war against God. Theologians have argued ad nauseum about this place. Is it literal, it is figurative? It certainly could be literal. However, given that John's primary audience is seven churches in Asia Minor, one wonders why he would consider Megiddo as necessary for his discussion? Perhaps it's precisely because of the memory Megiddo evokes in the minds of knowing Christian readers that Megiddo becomes the perfect backdrop against which to paint the picture of God's war with pagan kings.

What will be the outcome of the battle?

**Bowl seven** (V.17). Babylon the great will not stand in God's great judgement. This city was one of the wonders of the world with its hanging gardens built by Nebuchadnezzar. It was also seen symbolically as the center of opposition to God. Nebuchadnezzar like Belshazzar who followed him believed himself to be an emissary of the gods, therefore in complete control. That is until Daniel showed up. In Daniel we witness Nebuchadnezzar, and then Belshazzar being schooled by God on the matter of in divine and true sovereign control. Babylon went from a wonder of the world to a ghost town. Here Rome and Babylon are placed side by side so Rome can see her future in Babylon's past. God severely judges, those who stubbornly, rebelliously refuse to bow. But, they are bound and determined to maintain their position no matter what.

### **Making it real:**

**1. God is neither deaf nor aloof.** Like the Exodus and Daniel, here in Rev. God's people are reminded in a vivid way that he can and will rescue his people. He cares and in the right time he answers in dramatic ways. Sometimes we are convinced by our circumstances that God is either deaf or he doesn't really care. The images of Rev 16 make clear that this isn't true. We are to carry these images as a reminder. From a practical point of view, Rev is meant to enlarge our vision and ground our hope. History favors the faithful who wait for the Lord to act in his sovereign time and according to his will. Our memory of God's faithfulness through remembering the stories of God's deliverance of his people is a powerful way to remain hopeful and faithful in trying times.

**2. Powers of this world beware of your humbling.** No world power is beyond God's reach concerning judgement. And when his judgement falls it is exact and thorough. In the OT Obadiah had a sobering word of reality to the powers of this world illustrated through the kingdom of Edom that could well apply to Rome. I have traveled through Edom to get to the ancient city of Petra in southern Jordan. The red mountains are majestic and impressive. The Edomites thought themselves to be like their mountains, impenetrable, eternal, and unassailable. Edom said of itself,

**"Who will bring me down to earth?" (Ob V.3).**

God simply says through Obadiah,

**"The arrogance of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, in the loftiness of your dwelling place." (Ob V.3) To this arrogance God declares, "Though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down, declares the LORD." (Ob V.4).**

No nation, no matter how powerful, ought to let their present power, stature, or influence, go to their head.

**2. Churches beware of the lure of idolatry.** Five of the seven churches that were caught in the throes of compromise and caving in needed to see first-hand how God deals with the powers with which some of the churches were willing to prostitute themselves. If reading and heeding in order to find blessing are key in Revelation, then each of the cycles of judgement soberly warns them about the powers before which they find themselves bowing. There is still time to repent of their wrong-headed thinking. Remember at least five times the churches were called to repent of their error. Calling always sets the tone for responding to their surroundings. Where a clash of focus and priority happens, the direction is clear – follow Christ and remain faithful. This is the significance of Rev 1:5, 6, and 1:12-16. V. 5, 6 lays out their rescue and call to life and ministry. V.12-16 reinforces this with a spectacular vision meant to bolster the churches understanding of the sovereign, majestic, all powerful ruling one they are called to serve. Compromise and caving-in are not options, they are accommodations to appease the powers that be and avoid suffering. The example of Christ is clear, he remained faithful although he paid for his faithfulness with his life. This however is not the end of the story. This one who paid for his faithfulness with his life is also the one who holds the keys of death and Hades. The churches can be sure that their faithfulness will not go unnoticed or unrewarded.