

## THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST: THE REBELLION

Angels, Plagues, and Bowls of Wrath  
Revelation 15-16

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*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. 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. 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! 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.” After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. 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, 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 (Rev. 15).*

I’m going to make a statement and then ask you a question. Ready?

Statement: “It’s 9 p.m. It’s time for bed.”

If you are a 50-plus-year-old, like me, who loves the early morning, this is great news! Climbing into my bed and spending the next twenty minutes reading before I fall asleep is delightful. “It’s 9 p.m. and time for bed” is music to my ears.

However, if I’m 13 or under, this is hardly delightful news. That’s especially true if there are older siblings involved who get to stay up until 10 p.m. You can imagine the protests that are raised to this intolerable bedtime: “That’s not fair! Why don’t I get to stay up?” How many parents are familiar with this conversation?

But now consider how a tired mom feels about the statement and her child’s response. Hearing “That’s not fair” to a simple and wise request can be really discouraging. When you get up before your kids so that lunches are ready, make breakfast before they rush out the door, run all over town making their life more incredible than they’ll ever know, warmly greet them when they arrive home, make a great dinner for the entire family, help everyone with homework, and then maybe get the younger kids settled in bed—after all that to hear “That’s not fair” from your kids about something as simple as a bedtime can be frustrating.

I wonder how many parents have heard “That’s not fair” only to think “Let me tell you what’s fair!”

What’s interesting to me about this situation is that the issue is the same: the 9 p.m. bedtime is the same in both scenarios. The difference is the perception of fairness based upon the role of the person involved. A child and a parent have a very different view of a 9 p.m. bedtime.

Perspective shapes your understanding of fairness.

That’s important to keep in mind as we study Revelation 15-16. If you aren’t aware of the vantage point from which you are reading these chapters, you will draw the wrong conclusion about the message of the text.

These two chapters show us more divine judgment. It’s intense. It’s shocking. It’s disturbing. And it’s in the Bible for a reason. God could have supplied John a vision entirely about the new heaven and the new earth like we’ll see in Revelation 20-21. This vision could have been entirely lovely and beautiful. But if that were the case, I think we’d be suspicious. It would be like parents saying, “Having children is the best. They bring you nothing but joy and happiness all the days of your life.”

The lack of candor about the challenges of parenting hurts the credibility of the person talking. Revelation isn’t like that because God isn’t like that. And chapters 15-16 make that clear as we look at judgment from the vantage point of heaven and the vantage point of earth.

You could think of this sermon as really asking this question: **Do I view life through the lens of heaven or the lens of earth?**

Do you start with “Who is God?” or “Who am I?” Do you start with “What does God say?”, or do you start with “What do I think?” These chapters help us to see the importance of those questions. They show us an important contrast as we think about divine judgment.

### **The Heavenly Scene (Revelation 15)**

Chapter 14 ended with two harvests. One was redemptive. The other was punitive. The scene on earth was troubling. We read about a winepress of God’s wrath. Chapter 15 shifts the focus from the earth to heaven. John’s vision uses this reorientation often.

Chapter 15 begins with John saying that he “saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing...” In chapter 12 we heard similar language but with the woman and the dragon.

*And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars... And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems (Rev. 12:1-3).*

What is this sign? It’s seven angels with seven plagues. We’ve seen angels before. We’ve seen other judgments. But these are described as “great and amazing.” Why? Well, when you are studying the Bible, look for the answers near the text. That’s why reading slowly is important.

The second half of verse 1 tells us that these plagues “...are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished” (15:1b). Some people see these judgments as taking place in the future at the end of a coming tribulation. Others see these bowls as descriptive of the present judgment of God upon the world.

The broader point is that these verses describe the certain and final judgment of God.

But notice where this vision is located. Verse 1 indicated that this vision is in heaven, but verses 2-8 give us even more symbols. We need to consider each of them.

**Sea of glass mingled with fire** – Do you remember the meaning of the sea? It’s a symbol of chaos, disorder, and evil. Here John sees something like the sea, but it’s firm, beautiful, and contained. No waves and no storms. This image demonstrates the completeness of God’s judgment. It also brings in imagery from Revelation 4:6 where the throne room features a “sea of glass, like crystal.”

The addition of fire into the vision seems to emphasize the completion of judgment since fire is usually associated with it. There may also be some connection to the Exodus deliverance motif here because we’ll see a direction link in verse 3.

**God’s people** – We also see, once again, a group of people who are a part of this vision. Verse 2 describes them in familiar terms (see 12:11) as they stand beside the sea of glass. They have harps in their hands. Here again is a group of worshipers.

**The song of Moses** – We learn in verse 3 about the song they are singing. It’s called “the song of Moses...and the song of the Lamb.” Now, the song of Moses was sung after the crossing of the Red Sea and the defeat of Pharaoh. It’s found in Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32. If you were to compare them, you’d find the same theme but different words and phrases. Revelation 15 appears to be a distillation of the themes.

Take note of the God-centeredness of the song in Revelation 15:

*Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! 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 (Rev. 15:3-4).*

It’s an incredible song in light of the historical significance and its placement in the middle of this material on judgment. Do you understand the connection between worship and judgment? It’s not that the people are celebrating judgment. Rather, the starting point is the worthiness, holiness, and majesty of God. Understanding that helps us put things in the right perspective.

You might think of worship as something you do at the right time or maybe on Sundays. That would be true. But worship in this setting is different. Given the glory of God, not worshiping in the presence of God would be outrageous, inappropriate, even rebellious.

The glory of God is so captivating and glorious that anything competing for it or compromising it would be repulsive. What’s more, it could be dangerous.

**Seven angels** – Verses 5-6 add more to this vision as we see seven angels coming out of “the sanctuary of the tent of witness.” This structure is connected to the tabernacle in the wilderness. The point is that out of the central place of God’s glory come these angels. They are clothed in “pure, bright linen, with golden sashes.” The angels have a heavenly glory.

**Seven plagues / Seven bowls of wrath** – Everything listed previously in the vision is recorded in order to set up this description of divine judgment. These seven plagues will be unveiled in chapter 16 with great detail. But here we are told about their source—they come from the presence of God, “who lives forever and ever” (v. 7b). Verse 8 concludes the chapter by explaining how the sanctuary was filled with smoke from God’s glory and power, and that no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues are finished.

In other words, these judgments are not things that God merely allows to happen. No, this judgment is brought from the presence of God, carried out by angels, and must be completed. It will be completed. Why? The holiness of God demands it.

This is the heavenly scene. It’s hard to fully appreciate it because it’s not in our experience. We know little about the full display of God’s glory. As a result, we tend to lose the deep sense of understanding and appreciation for the judgment of God. Imagine how different you might see things if your starting point was God’s glory, his holiness, and what that means. Imagine walking the Garden of Eden before the presence of sin. Then imagine seeing the earth after the rebellion. Think about the shock and horror in heaven when learning about a murder in Adam and Eve’s family.

It’s hard to imagine how right the judgment is when you don’t know what it was like before. Maybe this will help. Imagine that you have a small group of eight people who meet in your home. Over the course of a year, you find deep friendship, community, and spiritual growth together. Everyone looks forward to coming, and it’s the kind of relationship environment that you’ve heard about. You all agree to invite three more people in order to multiply the joy. Sadly, there’s one person who turns out to be a huge problem. He’s not interested in the discussion unless he can “score points.” Saying awkward and rude things seems to be the only way he knows how to communicate. You’ve even heard about him sharing some of the things that are confidentially shared in the group. Three months after his arrival, the group is in shambles. No one shares. People privately begrudge coming. Obligation replaces anticipation. It’s awful. People are so discouraged that they are considering leaving.

How would you feel if someone said, “Look, I’m going to talk with him. This has got to change.” And what if you hear that the conversation didn’t go well, and he’s decided that small group is probably not best for him. You’d be sad that it’s come to that, but wouldn’t you be partly relieved? One person can ruin a group.

Now, take that fairly tame—but very realistic—illustration and imagine we are talking about the glory of God. There is going to be cosmic relief when God returns the world back to Eden. It’s why Jesus died. It’s why Jesus is coming again. And it’s important to think about this from a heavenly perspective.

Now let’s look at the other scene.

## The Earthly Scene (Revelation 16)

The next chapter, Revelation 16, is a description of the seven judgments or bowls of wrath. Verse 1 tells us that a voice from the temple provides the order: “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God” (16:1).

Once again, we see that these are not merely natural disasters. These are instruments in the hands of divine judgment. This is the intentional act of a righteous and just God. Let’s look at each of these.

**Painful sores (v. 2)** – The first judgment is poured out by the first angel. John describes “harmful and painful sores” that afflict those who have sided with the beast. These people are described in familiar terms: “who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.” It’s interesting to note here that these bowl judgments are similar to the plagues of Egypt. Here it’s mark for mark. Beast mark for boil mark. Beyond what this is, it’s “harmful and painful.” It makes life miserable.

**Deadly sea (v. 3)** – The second judgment affects everything living in the vast ocean. Something happens to the water such that widespread death and decay now characterize the ocean. I’ve visited the ocean before with Red Tide. I remember the coughing and smell. And that was just a few miles of ocean. It’s hard to think about what the effect globally would be if everything in the ocean died.

**Contaminated fresh water (v. 4)** – The third judgment affects the rivers and springs of water. In other words, this judgment falls on what’s needed to sustain human life. The text says that they became blood. I’m not sure if this is literally true or if it’s figurative language connected to what follows in verse 5.

The angel delivering this judgment speaks. It’s designed to be a pause in this string of judgments to reconnect us to why all this is happening. The punishment fits the crime.

*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. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!” And I heard the altar saying, “Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!” (Rev. 16:5-7).*

**Burning sun (v. 8)** – The fourth judgment relates to the sun as it burns out of control. The heat from the sun intensifies such that people were “scorched by the fierce heat.” Now, notice what follows in verse 9: “they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent or give him glory.”

That’s important, and it will become a theme. Rather than repent, the people of earth double down in their rebellion.

**Darkness (v. 10)** – The fifth judgment is the darkening of the sun, and it’s directed at the beast’s kingdom. The result is the same. The people cursed God and did not repent.

**Deception (vv. 12-14)** – The sixth judgment has more political implications as the Euphrates dries up for the purpose of preparing the way for kings from the east—a place unknown to John and his readers. The whole world is deluded and brought into the scheme to rebel against God. They assemble at Armageddon. Some take this literally. Others see it as a figurative place.

But notice the exhortation in verse 15! It's a call directly from Jesus (some may have red letters in their Bibles), and it's an invitation to be watchful and ready. This seems to be a reminder that these warnings are meant to make Christians wake up and be aware to live with a heavenly perspective.

**The end (vv. 17-21)** – The final verses of chapter 16 record the end of the world as everything in life falls apart. God has split the seams of the world. Just listen:

*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!" 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. 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. And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found (Rev. 16:17-20).*

What a moment it would be if the Bible then said, "When the people experienced the wrath of God, they humbled their hearts, repented of their sins, and turned to Christ as their King." Sadly, that's not what happens. The text ends with the familiar theme of people cursing God because the judgment was so severe (v. 21).

It's what happens when people are in rebellion against God and live only with an earthly perspective. They're enraged that God would punish them. They're shocked that they would be held accountable. They don't think it's fair. But that's only because they do not understand the vantage point of heaven, God's holiness and righteousness.

## **Applications**

Admittedly, this is a heavy text. It's the pinnacle of all the judgment texts in the book of Revelation. Let me apply this passage very simply to non-Christians and Christians.

If you have not turned from your sins and trusted Jesus as your Savior, I genuinely pray that these two chapters give you something to really think about. I don't want to scare you into becoming a Christian. Rather, I'd love for you to think about a few questions:

- Do you see the effects of evil around you and in you?
- Do you think it's okay if those things are never made right?
- How do you think the evil in you and in the world will be taken care of?
- Do you think what you've heard is true? And, if not, are you willing to take the risk of being wrong?

The message of the gospel is simply that God poured out the just judgment for sin upon Jesus at the cross. And the Bible promises that those who turn from their sins and put their trust in Jesus are forgiven, cleansed, and declared right with God. Why not today?

For those of you who are already Christians, these chapters serve as a reminder of the importance of seeing life and eternity from heaven's perspective. It's an opportunity for us to reflect on the glory of God, the nature of his holiness, and the purity of his character. It's a moment to grieve the brokenness of the world and long for his soon return. It's a chance for us to be reminded that grace is grace because it's unfair.

Grace is unmerited, unearned, and undeserving.

It's unfair, but that's what makes it unbelievably good news.

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