



## Part 34 – “Will Not a Righteous God Visit for These Things?”

### Revelation 16:1-11

The title of the sermon is taken from the autobiography of Frederick Douglas. As Douglas, a freed slave, considered his grandmother, who after years of cruel captivity was sent off to die alone once she was no longer useful to her master, he asked, “Will not a righteous God visit for these things?” It is the question that could be asked at any moment of fallen human history. Indeed, the psalmists cried out in ways very similar to that of Douglas:

“O LORD, God of vengeance,  
 O God of vengeance, shine forth!  
 Rise up, O judge of the earth;  
 repay to the proud what they deserve!” (Psalm 94:1-2)

The ever-present cycle of news from around the world illustrates the profligacy of human evil and the suffering of the innocent. Through it all we see the holy name of God profaned and his law mocked. Mankind, in his pride, has rejected his Maker and insisted on claiming the status of a god himself. Considering these things, is not the idea of a God without wrath morally incomprehensible? Day after day we are reminded that the world needs a God who judges. We need to be able to say with David: “God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day” (Psalm 7:11).

### ***The First Five Bowls...***

Like the seals and the trumpets, the seven bowls are symbols of God’s acts of judgment upon the world. Both the trumpet and bowl judgments are patterned after the plagues of Egypt described in the Book of Exodus. Chapter 16 provides details concerning the bowl judgments that were introduced in chapter 15. The seal and trumpet judgments depict events and phenomena that occur in every age. These are expressions of God’s judgment. There is some debate among scholars as to whether the bowls depict only the final judgment or, like the seals and trumpets, describe the period of time between the first and second advents of Christ. Whichever the case, “there is some intensification from seals to trumpets to bowls, and each series concludes at the end of history and the final judgment.”<sup>1</sup>

- *The First Bowl*

**Vv. 1-2** – “Then I heard a loud voice from the temple...” Notice how the bowls of judgment to be poured out upon the world issue from the holy presence of God. We see this with the seals and trumpets as well. It is a reminder that God’s judgment is not an impersonal mechanism or automated response system. This is not karma! God is directly responsible for his judgment. The first bowl is said to be for those who have received the mark of the beast. As we have seen previously, the mark is depicted as being on the head and hand which “symbolizes the world’s control of their minds and therefore their actions.”<sup>2</sup> Having received the beast’s mark, they now receive upon their flesh the mark of God’s wrath (vs. 2). “Those marked out as followers of the beast will be marked by the Lord with physical anguish.”<sup>3</sup>

- *The Second and Third Bowls*

**Vv 3-4** – Now God’s wrath is visited upon the waters of the earth in a way reminiscent of the Nile long ago (Exodus 7:21). The seas and rivers of the world are poisoned and all that is in them dies. John’s original readers would have understood that, given the Empire’s dependence upon the Mediterranean Sea for food and trade, its destruction is tantamount to the destruction of the Empire itself. Just as the persecutors of God’s people have shed their blood, so now does God give them blood to drink. What man sows, that will he reap. God’s judgment of the prostitute Babylon is often described as “blood for blood” imagery.<sup>4</sup> It is gruesome, no doubt, but it pictures the retributive nature of true justice.

- *The Fourth Bowl*

**Vv. 8-9** – “The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun...” – Among the ancients, fire was often associated with divine judgment. In the first trumpet judgment, the earth is scorched by fire (8:7). What was once a blessing to believer and unbeliever alike (Matthew 5:45) will become an instrument of judgment.

<sup>1</sup> J. Scott Duvall, *A Theology of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2025) p. 232

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001) p. 225

<sup>3</sup> Brent Lauder, *Apocalypse Then, Now, and Soon* (Storied Publishing, 2023) p. 246

<sup>4</sup> J. Scott Duvall, p. 232

- *The Fifth Bowl*

**Vs. 10** – Here is the only mention of “the throne of the beast.” Given that the beast represents the satanic corruption of human government, it is fitting that it is depicted as possessing a throne. God’s judgment is poured out directly upon the beast’s seat of earthly power. Like fire, darkness was widely considered a sign of divine judgment. In the fourth trumpet judgment, the earth is afflicted with darkness (8:12). The darkness of God’s judgment contrasts with the glory of God in the holy city (21:23). Those under the judgment of God gnaw their tongues in the way that Jesus describes those in “outer darkness” or “in the blazing furnace” (Matthew 8:12; 13:42).

***The Heavenly Doxology...***

Between the third and fourth bowls, John records an angelic doxology that affirms the righteousness of God’s acts of judgment.

**Vs. 5** – “The angel in charge of the waters,” is a bit challenging to interpret. It could possibly mean that the Lord has charged his angels to preside over various elements in the material world. It seems to me that most likely this angel is given authority to carry out God’s judgment over “the waters,” which may refer to the economic prosperity of the world in John’s day. This angel is not troubled by the severity of God’s judgment for he is the “Holy One,” whose ways are just.

**Vs. 6** – “For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets...” – God will not forget his persecuted and murdered saints. “Both the individuals and nations that persecute and kill Christians will be held accountable before God. They may not suffer retributive justice in this life, but they will most certainly face it when they stand before God’s throne in the final judgment.”<sup>5</sup>

“...it is what they deserve.” – God will not judge a single soul that is underserving of such judgment. The angel gives praise to God for the integrity and validity of God’s judgment upon the wicked. God’s judgment will never be disproportionate but will always be in perfect harmony with his goodness and truth.

**Vs. 7** – “The altar” is surely a reference to the martyred saints (6:9-11) who give full affirmation to the validity of God’s retributive justice. John Stott has written that “The wrath of God...is his steady, unrelenting, unremitting, uncompromising antagonism to evil in all its forms and manifestations.”<sup>6</sup>

***The Unbelieving Response...***

**Vv. 9-11** – “More terrible than the judgment inflicted upon the earth-dwellers is their reaction to God’s just recompense.”<sup>7</sup> Twice the unbelieving people of the world are described as responding to God’s judgment with hardhearted blasphemy. Despite their agony under the judgment of God, they refuse to abandon their wickedness, falsehood, idolatry, violence, immorality, and the like. Even in judgment they prefer their sin. Jesus warned the unbelieving religious leaders of his day (who had everything they needed to believe in Jesus!) that the wicked city of Nineveh, who repented under the preaching of Jonah, will bear witness against them for their refusal to receive the Messiah (Matthew 12:41).

*The Book of Revelation*, with its unequivocal God-centeredness, reminds us of the moral necessity of divine judgment. The judgment depicted in the visions of the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls issue forth from the sanctuary of God’s holy presence. That is, judgement is God’s own personal action. It is directly connected to his goodness, faithfulness, and righteousness. God’s holy wrath will be misunderstood from one degree to another if we do not understand both the degree of sin’s wickedness and of God’s holiness. But an honest assessment of the catastrophe of sin and the need for final justice to make right all that is wrong will help us understand why the saints in heaven praise the Lord for his judgment. We need a God to whom we can call, “Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand; forget not the afflicted” (Psalm 10:12), in confidence that he will answer. We need a God who will eventually *visit for these things*.

***He bore the wrath reserved for me...***

The Lord knows the agony of his own judgment for he bore it the Person of Jesus Christ. For every believer, the final judgment has already occurred upon the cross where the Father spared not his own Son but gave him up for us all (Romans 3:21-26; 8:32).

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<sup>5</sup> Sam Storms, *Our God Reigns* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2024) p. 410

<sup>6</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986) p. 173

<sup>7</sup> Grant Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) p. 586