

SESSION 9

REVELATION 15:1–16:16

The First Six Bowl Judgments

I. OVERVIEW

Chapters 12–14 gave us a close examination of the major opponents in this eschatological conflict and concluded with assurances that the Lamb and His followers would triumph over the Dragon and those who followed after the Beast (i.e., the Antichrist). Beginning with 15:1, John shifts back to the main narrative action. This begins the third and final cycle of judgment before Christ's second advent. This third cycle of judgment is the section 15:1–19:10.

15:1–16:1	–	Heavenly Prelude	
16:2-12	–	Six Bowl Judgments	
16:13-16	–	Interlude	
16:17–19:10	–	7th Bowl	{ 16:17-21 — General Description 17:1–19:10 — Elaboration of Babylon's Judgment

From a literary standpoint, the bowls are seen as the unfolding of the seventh trumpet. The accelerating movement toward conquest is the focus of this section. In these judgments, there is an *increasing affront* by God against the Beast and those who follow him, in preparation for the clinching victory in Rev 19.

Chapter 16 portrays the final series of judgments, in which there are some striking parallels with the trumpet judgments of Rev 8–11.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1/3 of earth, trees & grass burned	1/3 of sea to blood, sea creatures & ships	1/3 of rivers & springs; wormwood	1/3 of sun, moon & stars darkened	Demonic Locust Plague; Severe Treatment!	Release of 4 angels at Euphrates; Armies; 1/3 killed	Anticipation of Kingdom as 7 Bowls Next
8:7	8:8-9	8:10-11	8:12	9:1-11	9:13-21	11:15-19

TRUMPET JUDGMENTS

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sores on those with mark & who worship beast	Sea like blood; all sea life dies	Rivers & springs as blood	Scorching sun torments mankind	Beast's Kingdom darkened	Euphrates dries up; kings from east; Harmagedon	Great Earthquake; Cities fall; Babylon judged.
16:2	16:3	16:4-7	16:8-9	16:10-11	16:12-16	16:17–19:10

BOWL JUDGMENTS

Mounce notes,

In each series the first four plagues are visited upon the earth, sea, inland waters, and heavenly bodies respectively. The fifth involves darkness and pain (cf. 16:10 with 9:2,5-6), and the sixth, enemy hordes from the vicinity of the Euphrates (cf. 16:12 with 9:14ff).<sup>1</sup> However, even Mounce cautions us from carrying out the recapitulation too far, because there are distinct differences:

1. The trumpet-plagues are partial in their effect (one-third of the earth is burned, 8:7; one-third of the sea becomes blood, 8:8; see also 8:9-12) while the bowls are universal ("every living soul died," 16:3; "every island fled away," 16:20) and final in effect;
2. The trumpets are to a certain extent a call to repentance, while the bowls are the pouring out of divine wrath;
3. Man is affected indirectly by the first four trumpets but is directly attacked from the outset by the bowls;
4. It should also be noticed that the bowls are poured out in rapid succession with the customary interlude between the sixth and seventh elements of the sequence missing.

## II. HEAVENLY PRELUDE (15:1–16:1)

Chapter fifteen opens with the announcement that the wrath of God is finished with these seven last plagues. Once again, we are encountered by a heavenly perspective before viewing the judgments to follow. The heavenly perspective is one of victory for those who refuse to follow the Beast but instead turn to Christ. They sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. The martyred throng actually sing two songs as Walvoord notes,

The former recounts the faithfulness of God to Israel as a nation in recognition that a large number of Israelites are among these martyred dead. The song of the Lamb speaks of redemption from sin made possible by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God; and would include all the saints.<sup>2</sup>

The heavenly tabernacle scene recounts how awesome is God's judgment to follow:

The whole scene is most symbolic of what is about to happen. The angels coming out of the sanctuary indicate that the judgments to be poured out stem from the holiness of God and are properly required of God who must do all things right.<sup>3</sup>

A. Portrayal of the victors who have emerged triumphant from the great ordeal (vv. 1-4)

1. Sign called "marvelous" –

The mention of the seven plagues in v 1 suggests that this begins a new section in which all the remaining judgments (the bowls) are going to be set forth. The "sign" (consisting of the seven angels who had the seven plagues) is called marvelous by John because they represent the completion of God's wrath.

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 291.

<sup>2</sup>John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation*, 227-28.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 229.

The word "plagues" for the final judgments seems intended to remind the reader of the plagues that once were poured out on Egypt (in fact, some of the bowl judgments have striking similarities to the plagues on Egypt). Thomas (2:230) explains the significance:

The first and third bowl-plagues are particularly reminiscent of what God did to punish the Egyptians and to deliver His people Israel. Besides the plagues, other features of this context that resemble God's previous deliverance are the crossing of the sea (16:12), the song of Moses (15:3), the giving of the Law amid the smoke of Sinai (15:8), and the erection of the tent of testimony (15:5). These similarities hint that the seven bowls have a similar purpose, that of punishing the world as a whole and delivering the faithful into their promised bliss.

2. Identity of those who "come off victorious from the beast" (vs. 2)  
The text calls attention to "those who had come off victorious from the beast." These are probably martyrs at the hands of the Antichrist, possibly the same as those mentioned in 12:11. They are highlighted here, because they had remained faithful to the point of death instead of yielding to the demands of the Antichrist. Yet they are in heaven before the final bowl judgments are poured out.
3. Which song of Moses?  
This could be a reference to either Ex 15 (the song of victory over the Egyptians) or to Deut 32 (written by Moses at the end of his career). In favor of Deut 32, note that (1) Deut 32:4 and Rev 15:3 are similar; (2) Deut 32 is a song of judgment; (3) Deut 31:21 in introducing it, calls this a "song never to be forgotten;" and (4) Deut 32:29 says that the song deals with the latter days. However, there are valid reasons for connecting this to Ex 15 (favored by Thomas): (1) Ex 15 was a song of victory, just as this was a song of victory over the Beast; (2) the Passover lamb commemorated the Egyptian deliverance, and the "Lamb" is mentioned here in Rev 15:3; (3) Rev 15:4 is quite similar to Ex 15:11; and (4) the plague and judgment motif of the broader section of Rev 15–16 is similar to the plagues on Egypt.

- B. Appearance of 7 angels in the heavenly temple holding 7 bowls of the last plagues (vv 5-8)

Just because these seven bowls are called the "wrath of God" in 15:7 does not mean that we should limit God's wrath to these final judgments (some would want to put the rapture just before the seven bowl judgments). The preceding judgments also express God's wrath, as confirmed by Rev 6:16-17.

### III. SIX BOWL JUDGMENTS (16:2-16)

These judgments are particularly marked off by their focus upon the kingdom of the beast and upon his followers. Even the waters that are turned to blood remind us of the blood-shedding of saints by the Antichrist. A second observation is the hardness of heart by those who refuse to repent in the face of the most stringent and evident divine discipline. Men are getting what they deserve (16:6)!

- A. 1st Bowl (16:1-2)  
The first bowl parallels Ex 9 and the sores on the Egyptians. These sores persist and are very agonizing, for the people are still blaspheming God on account of them after the 5<sup>th</sup> bowl (note 16:11).
- B. 2nd Bowl (16:3)  
Both the second and third bowls affect the water supply on earth, the first the salt waters and

the second the fresh waters. Being turned to blood parallels Exodus 7.

C. 3rd Bowl (16:4-7)

D. 4th Bowl (16:8-9)

Notice in v 9 that the people recognize God is in power, and yet they are unwilling to repent.

E. 5th Bowl (16:10-11)

The 5<sup>th</sup> bowl seems to be aimed directly at the heart of the Antichrist's kingdom. Notice that plagues five through seven have more of a political orientation in contrast with plagues one through four. That is, these latter three involve significant political consequences for the Antichrist and his realm. The reference to "his kingdom" in 16:10 suggests a concrete kingdom with geographical extent (not just his rule). Just as "darkness" was a judgment upon Pharaoh's kingdom near the end of the entire cycle (Ex 10:21), so it is with the Antichrist. Darkness was a fitting judgment upon the Egyptians who had worshipped the sun, and darkness was a fitting reminder to everyone of the spiritual darkness that attended the Antichrist and his kingdom.

Notice in 16:11 the reference to the response of the unregenerate at this point. Hardening has run its course, and they are utterly hostile to God and refuse all opportunity to repent.

F. 6th Bowl (16:12-16) – THE WAR OF ARMAGEDDON

The 6<sup>th</sup> bowl is described in v 12, and the following verses in 13-16 seem to be an expansion of that bowl judgment (rather than an interlude before the 7<sup>th</sup> bowl).

1. The waters of the Euphrates dried up for the "kings from the east" (16:12)

Should the drying up of the Euphrates be understood literally or spiritually? The fact that the drying up of the waters provides access for the kings from the east demands that this have a literal and geographical connotation (as literal as 19:17-19). As for these kings, they are probably kings from the eastern regions of the Middle East (cf. Isa 41:2,25; Matt 2:1-2,9) who invade Israel in connection with the final great conflict. They are one portion making up "the kings of the whole world" (16:14). Whether they are coming to fight with or against the Beast is not clear, nor is their reason for coming. Could this movement of kings from the east possibly be related to "the rumors from the East" mentioned in Dan 11:44?

2. "three unclean spirits like frogs" (16:13-14)

The unclean spirits usher forth from the Satanic alliance in their preparation for the final showdown. Mounce observes,

The unclean spirits proceed from the mouths of the unholy triumvirate, suggesting the persuasive and deceptive propaganda which in the last days will lead men to an unconditional commitment to the cause of evil.<sup>4</sup>

"like frogs" – See Lev 11:10-11 where frogs were declared as "unclean" and an abomination to God's people. Also, recall the frogs of the second plague of Egypt (Ex 8:5).

3. A reminder to believers (16:15)

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<sup>4</sup>Mounce, 299.

This is a reminder to the believers living at this final moment of the tribulation to be faithful, for their Lord is coming very soon. The reminder is given at this point, in light of the severity of the situation (the world war) and the implications this will have for everyone on earth. Regarding the theme of clean garments, recall Rev 3:4-5, 18 and the promises to the believers of the seven churches.

4. Armageddon (16:16)

Har-Magedon = Gk Ἁρμαγεδών = Heb מִגְדּוֹן מָגִדּוֹן (see *BDB* 151d)

that is, "the hill of Megiddo." Megiddo was an ancient city in north-central Israel situated on a hillside overlooking the Valley of Jezreel.

The fact that this war is called "the war of the great day of God, the Almighty" and the fact that it is said to involve "the kings of the whole world" leaves no doubt that this is the dreaded battle of Armageddon. The site location of the Valley of Jezreel is probably not to be understood as the total extent of the conflict (such an area is too small for a conflict of this proportion). Rather, this will probably be a focal point of the action.

This last major conflict is probably to be connected to the battle scene described in Rev 19, in which the Beast and "the kings of the earth and their armies" are assembled against the Lord. We are not given a lengthy description as to how this conflict will ensue, but this is probably to be correlated with such OT passages as Joel 3, Dan 11:40-45, and Zech 12–14. The invasion of Gog and Magog depicted in Ezek 38–39, however, is probably not a part of this scenario.<sup>5</sup> From our OT revelation (esp. Zech 12–14), we know that there will be a siege by all the nations of the world against Judea and Jerusalem as the final scene leading up to the Second Coming of Christ.

In this final battle campaign of Armageddon, it is not clear as to who is aligned with whom. We should recall that in Dan 11:40-45, the Antichrist will be in conflict with other middle-east confederations within the "Holy Land" just prior to his defeat. We can probably presume that though the Beast has universal dominion during most of the final 3 ½ years of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week, his kingdom begins to collapse near the end, and he is forced into conflict with various military confederations. Apparently he prevails through this rebellion, for he is still the dominant player at the time of Christ's return (Rev 19:19).

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<sup>5</sup> J. Paul Tanner, "Rethinking Ezekiel's Invasion of Gog," *JETS* 39:1 (Mar 1996): 29-46.