

Revelation Bible Study #39

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Revelation 16:1-7

1 Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.”

2 So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.

3 The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea.

4 The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. 5 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.

6 For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets,
and you have given them blood to drink.
It is what they deserve!”

7 And I heard the altar saying,

“Yes, Lord God the Almighty,
true and just are your judgments!”

Introduction

Seven angels have appeared from the Tabernacle in Heaven to pour out drink offerings of wrath for God. Since St. John has already told us that this is a *sign* vision like the previous one,¹ we must be careful to trace the meaning of the signs, especially in their clear references to the Exodus. With the plagues being poured out, the message is not one of Divine catharsis – or more simply put, anger for its own sake – but rather an outpouring of Divine wrath for the sake of deliverance. The Church, being the true Israel, has been simultaneously in a position of wilderness wandering *and* bondage to an oppressive world system. Now, as St. John has emphasized before in the vision of the trumpets,² it is time to afflict the new Egypt so as to bring God's people home.

Vs.1

1 Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.”

The drink offering in ancient Israel consisted of wine,³ which in Revelation is presented as a symbol of God's wrath; this outpouring was predicted in the fourteenth chapter.⁴ Since it is a precursor to the damnation of the wicked under the final judgment, these bowls represent *earthly* plagues and devastation, not something in the hereafter. Much of the plagues resemble the destruction rained down on the earth during the seven trumpets, meaning this is a *recapitulation* of that same prophetic cycle. Thus, from the moment of Pentecost to the day Christ returns, these plagues are a recurring reality on

1 Revelation 15:1

2 The Trumpets (esp. Revelation 8:6-13) retain heavy imagery of the Exodus, albeit with less emphasis on the event itself.

3 Numbers 15:10

4 Revelation 14:10

the godless.

The angels come from the Tabernacle in Heaven,⁵ but the voice calls from the heavenly Temple. This interaction demonstrates the unique role of each edifice within the Heavenly realm. On earth, the Temple replaced the Tabernacle for means of sacerdotal labor, with God approving the transition by the appearance of a cloud of glory.⁶ In Heaven though, the Tabernacle serves a sacerdotal role for the sake of the saints, while the Temple which has the Ark of the Covenant appears to be the Throne Room proper of our Lord.

The bowls are poured out, as stated above, as a *drink* offering. But a drink offering was typically done as part of a larger offering with a specific purpose, namely “to fulfill a vow or as a freewill offering or at your appointed feasts.”⁷ The eternal destruction of the damned in the lake of fire constituted the *burnt offering* portion of the sacrifice. Since the vision of the bowls ends with Judgment Day, this means that their purpose is to represent the fulfillment of God's promises made to the Church – that He shall deliver us and bring us to the Resurrection, eternal life and blessedness. Note, however, that God is not making an offering in the sense that He would be making an offering to some other deity! Rather, since the angels are the ones making the offering, it is they who are bringing about this fulfillment of God's promise, thus making the offering *to* the One who promised.

Vs.2

2 So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.

The sixth plague inflicted upon Egypt before the Exodus was boils. This applies to nonbelievers only, those who have accepted the mark – that is, continuous, stubborn, lifelong refusal to believe in Christ. Like the Israelites who were unaffected by this plague, Christians are not subject to it. Note the *effect* of the plague of boils, namely that “the magicians could not stand before Moses.”⁸ It is also the first time in which *God* hardens Pharaoh's heart instead of Pharaoh hardening his own heart. In other words, with the first bowl being poured out, those who take the mark are hardened, being given over to their debased desires; they have made their choice, and cannot turn back. Thus while there may not be physical boils inflicted on the nonbelievers, the vision portrays the way that Christianity comes to outshine the false religions of the world, such that they cannot stand against the faith when held up to scrutiny. St. John is not predicting a particular affliction (lest we assume that any man with a boil is damned), but rather he sees the representation of those who were given up to the lusts of their defiled hearts.⁹

Vs.3-7

3 The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea.

4 The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. 5 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.

6 For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets,

5 Revelation 15:5

6 1 Kings 8:1-11

7 Numbers 15:3

8 Exodus 9:8-12

9 Romans 1:24-32

and you have given them blood to drink.
It is what they deserve!”

7 And I heard the altar saying,
“Yes, Lord God the Almighty,
true and just are your judgments!”

The first plague inflicted upon Egypt was the waters turned into blood.¹⁰ Not only that, but the waters of *the Nile*, which formed a central part of religion for the Egyptians who relied on it for irrigation. For every plague with which our Lord afflicted the Egyptians, He was condemning one of their false gods – especially, but not restricted to, the Passover.¹¹ While they did not worship the Nile itself per se, they saw it as the source of all their good, making it *functionally* a deity. As Luther says, “A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress, so that to have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe Him from the whole heart; as I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol.”¹²

If the false religions of the world are judged by the first bowl's pouring such that their leadership – or “magicians” cannot stand before Christ – the second and third represent the judgment against man's revealed preferences in worship, just as God condemned the waters of the Nile. That which men are shown to worship by their deeds, acquisitions, and habits shall fail them, in accordance with the second angel's warning in the fourteenth chapter – that Babylon would fall, and nothing man trusts in beside God shall stand.¹³

One might note that the ordering of the plagues is different between Exodus and Revelation. This is of course intentional. The plague of boils rendered the Egyptian magicians incapable of standing before Moses; prior to that, there were able to re-create some of the plagues, namely turning water into blood. The implication is that none of the false beliefs will be able to do what God accomplishes through the Church. This is why there are *two* bowls which turn water into blood. False religions and false teachers, being unable to do what God is doing, fall before the Church; this allows the faith (and the condemnation of false religion) to spread far beyond just “the sea” and into every river and spring of water.

The “angel in charge of the waters,” that is, the angel carrying the third bowl, notes in his praise the reversal which God is accomplishing in this moment of wrath. The entire world system is condemned as the Church's proclamation goes throughout all lands. This message mirrors that of Obadiah's oracle, which reads:

For the day of the LORD is near upon all the nations.
As you have done, it shall be done to you;
your deeds shall return on your own head.
For as you have drunk on my holy mountain,
so all the nations shall drink continually;
they shall drink and swallow,
and shall be as though they had never been.
But in Mount Zion there shall be those who escape,
and it shall be holy,
and the house of Jacob shall possess their own possessions.
The house of Jacob shall be a fire,
and the house of Joseph a flame,
and the house of Esau stubble;
they shall burn them and consume them,

¹⁰ Exodus 7:14-25

¹¹ Exodus 12:12

¹² Large Catechism: <https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/ten-commandments/#1c-i-0002>

¹³ Revelation 14:8

and there shall be no survivor for the house of Esau,
for the LORD has spoken.¹⁴

The prophet mightily declares that the nations shall suffer the same as they did to God's people, with the exception of those who escape by going to Mount Zion. The result will be the house of Esau burning. Likewise, the world shall be judged; first by the condemnation of all its belief systems, then by the destruction of nonbelievers entirely. Only those who escape to the *heavenly* Mount Zion will be safe, having converted to the true faith. Those who do not shall burn. This running theme of reversal for the sake of justice, but with an exception made for those who repent, is perennial in Scripture. Ezekiel notes the same dynamic when giving an oracle from the Lord concerning the house of Israel, that they shall have a new heart – but those who do not shall have “their deeds upon their own heads.”¹⁵ In other words, as the angel says, “It is what they deserve!” The world has attacked Christianity by insulting its dogmas and killings its saints; now it is time for the world's belief systems to be destroyed and at the end for its largest adherents, those who take the mark, to be sent off to burn. They shall be “martyrs” in a sense, in that they witness to the horrors of their wicked, evil, ugly cause.

The altar itself (or perhaps the *true* and holy martyrs under it)¹⁶ proclaims that God's judgments are true and just. This is to say, the actions that God is commanding have their root in His being, but also in Christ who *is* the Truth.¹⁷ All of God's judgments are already righteous – but they add that His judgments are *true* and just, amounting to a proclamation that our Lord does this on behalf of Christ and His Church.

14 Obadiah 1:15-18

15 Ezekiel 11:14-21

16 Revelation 6:9

17 John 14:6