

Revelation 15-16: “Last Seven: The Bowl Judgments”

Locating Ourselves:

Let's remember the shape of Revelation. The book starts with an introduction, and then goes into letters that are written to seven specific churches in the Roman province of Asia, all of which are dealing with their own complicated stuff, all of whom have engaged with Roman society to greater or lesser degrees. In order to take part in the Empire around them, they have to take part in the Imperial Cult, the religion of the empire, which means worshipping the emperor, past emperors, their families, as Gods, as saviors and peace-makers.

But John is telling them “Don't do it! Every claim Rome makes is devilish and the Empire is going to be judged for their evil.” And we're presented with three takes on the judgment that God is bringing upon the world, three increasingly close views, that give us as readers of Revelation less and less time to choose to be on God's winning side.

Looking at that set of seven judgments that are coming on the Roman Empire is like looking through a microscope who's focus is slowly being cranked in.

Our first look? The Seal Judgments and their effects. We crank in, and see the Trumpet Judgments: An even closer look at the effects judgment will result in, increasingly terrible. And today? The Bowl Judgments...and to get a good look, we've had to crank that microscope so close to the little glass slide that it shatters, and all we see is shards and mess.

So let's walk through this last set of seven judgments, we'll summarize some of what we've seen thus far in Revelation, and we'll also connect this stuff to what's coming up in our calendars. Pray with me!

Prayer:

Foundations: Wrath

We should talk about wrath for a moment. We don't think about God's wrath, much, for all sorts of reasons, but one thing we need to understand is that wrath is not equal to anger.

We know what anger is, right? It's an emotion. And as Christians, we know that there is nothing wrong with emotions, we know that there is nothing wrong with anger by itself: it's an understandable result of the frustrations and limitations of life and its brokenness. But we're not supposed to act out of it, we're not supposed to act out of our anger. If we're typical, though, when it comes to being angry we rarely just experience it, you know? We almost always do something when we're angry--usually not loving--against someone or something else.

And even though we use the word to mean, really, really angry, *especially angry, wrath is not equal to anger*. Wrath as a theological term is basically God's judgment against sin. Giving people what they want. In Revelation, God's judgment against the continual blasphemy and pride of Rome and those who join it.

God has given us who read Revelation, we who live in the

Province of Asia, the chance to repent twice now. Twice we've seen this set of judgments. But by the Bowl Judgments, those who didn't respond to the first two takes, the first two looks: they've cemented their fate. Part of the message here is repent before it's too late to repent.

And so wrath happens: judgment. Not because God is so angry he can't stand it, but because God is God, Rome is not, and those who want to ascribe to Rome what only God should receive will cash out the account Rome's been paying into.

God's wrath ends up looking an awful lot like allowing people the freedom to do what they want to do, but also permitting them to drink whatever it is they've been brewing.

15:1-4: Wrath Completed

Let's talk about this chapter:

1 I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God's wrath is completed. 2 And I saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and its image and over the number of its name. They held harps given them by God 3 and sang the song of God's servant Moses and of the Lamb:

***"Great and marvelous are your deeds,
Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways,
King of the nations.***

**4 Who will not fear you, Lord,
and bring glory to your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship before you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed."**

Today's scene introduces the Seven Angels who have Seven Judgments, which are described here as Bowls full of plague. And these are the "last plagues," because "with them God's wrath is completed." God's judgment against sin has fully matured, has run its course. The devil has sown blasphemy and lies that have caused people to worship him and his little puppet, Rome; the devil has sown persecution of the sealed ones, Christians who have refused to worship Rome; and with the Bowl Judgments, the devil harvests the fruit of these plants he's been tending.

But there's another perspective on this, right? For the ones who have been on the receiving end of Rome's persecution, whose lives have been just totally disrupted or ended as they've tried to say no to the Imperial Cult, they're rejoicing. They're vindicated. They're praising God. For the persecuted this is a triumphant vision. We this morning almost never read this passage from their perspective.

15: 5-8: Revelation's Flip Book

And John uses his standard "after this," phrase, letting us know that a new vision has jumped up before him. And it's of God's heavenly Temple--the real Temple, which the one in Jerusalem was only a copy of. And it's open: we're looking in on the Holy of Holies.

Remember that at the end of the first series of Seal Judgments, which were light and easy compared to these Bowl Judgments, we read: “the angel took the censer and filled with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.”

And from there we moved into the second look at these judgments, the Trumpet Judgments, and when they were over, we read “God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and earthquake, and heavy hail.”

And now, we see this: ***After this I looked, and I saw in heaven the temple—that is, the tabernacle of the covenant law—and it was opened. 6 Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. 7 Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. 8 And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.***”

In some ways, all this judgment stuff we've seen is sort of background noise as God is getting up from His chair. It's what's going on as God rouses himself and opens up his temple to act on behalf of his holy, sealed ones.

Do we get this imagery? A picture flashes, and the Heavenly Temple starts to quake; the picture fades, then another picture flashes, and the temple quakes even more and opens; it fades, too, then a third picture flashes, and destroying angels fly out of the open Temple to act against those that kill and persecute God's people.

And in between the flashes there was time for us to change our ways, there were previews of the judgment that would fall on Rome, the devil, those of us who take part in worship of them both. But the last picture doesn't fade away. The Bowl Judgments don't fade away.

And we see for a moment in Chapter 16 the final set of judgments: The Bowl Judgments, described as "plagues."

The Bowl Judgments:

The first few echo the plagues of Exodus, which is no surprise: It was God's final judgment on the Egyptian Empire. I've added more in the message online about these few. Heat and darkness follow that one; again, a little more online.

And then the sixth judgment is poured out. It's wild.

The Bowl Judgments: The Final Judgment:

12 The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East. 13 Then I saw three [unclean] spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false

prophet. 14 They are demonic spirits that perform signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.

15 "Look, I come like a thief! Blessed are those who stay awake and keep their clothes on, so that they may not go naked and be shamefully exposed."

16 Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

Remember I mentioned the Parthians to the east of the Empire? They were the Roman Empire's only real viable enemy at the time John was writing. In the first century, the Euphrates was established as the Eastern boundary between Parthia & Rome (Keener, 270). This final Bowl Judgment is a declaration of the fall of the empire. As I was preparing this week I kept having "The Final Countdown" in my head. Not helpful, really.

Rome, whose power came from the dragon, the devil, will fall; and John envisions their fall at the hand of the enemies they have feared for so long.

And there's this mention of these three "unclean spirits," who gather the enemies of Rome to a place that "in Hebrew is Armageddon," which really sounds like an invitation to figure out his riddle, right? The frog-spirit stuff I'm going to skip and add to the posted message, but these are basically propagandizers who get Rome help against this coded Parthian enemy.

What? Armageddon

“Armageddon” in Hebrew is “Har Magiddo,” which means “The Mountain at Megiddo.” This was a place that Josiah, the sort of hero-King of the book of 2 Kings, who brought Israel back to covenant faithfulness--it was where he had been killed (ibid.). Megiddo is also mentioned in the book of Zechariah, which associates Megiddo with the “Day of the Lord,” a special period of time that the prophets looked forward to when God would finally judge evil, finally reward faithfulness, and finally make good on His promises (ibid.).

And this “Day of the Lord” in the New Testament is all wrapped up in Jesus--he set it in motion, started it; but what we thought would happen all at once, has been stretched out: it’s already started, but has not yet been completed. The “Day of the Lord,” has dawned; but John is looking for its sun to set, and looking especially toward the day after, the world that Revelation 21 & 22 will talk so much about.

We use the word “Armageddon” to talk about “the end of the world,” and you know, that’s not a terrible thing for us to do, because in some real ways John wants us to link the finality of “The Day of the Lord,” to what he’s talking about now. Of course, we don’t think of God all that much when we talk about Armageddon, because movies don’t, and that’s what has really shaped our thinking about this stuff.

But by referencing “Har Megiddo,” all John is doing is saying “The Day of the Lord” is going to set, now. These Bowl Judgments, they’re the last ones. They’ll give way to the final end of evil, when all those who have partnered with the

devil against the Lamb and his followers will drink what they've been brewing, reap what they've been sowing.

A Little Flip-Book:

And we take our stack of pictures of the Temple opening, and stack them together and make a little flip book:

Picture One: The Temple rumbles,

Picture Two: The Temple shakes & opens:

Picture Three: Angels fly out from the Temple:

And now, our Final Picture of God's Heavenly Temple--at least in its current Location. Revelation 16:17:

17 The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, "It is done!" 18 Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since the human race has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. 19 The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. 20 Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. 21 From the sky huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds, [b] fell on people. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible.

It is done. There are no more sets of seven, no more possibilities for those marked by the Beast to repent. The

cast has hardened. We had chances with every flip, chances with every set of perfect judgments, but there are no more flips, no more Temple-shots, no more sets of seven. Next time we hear mention of the Temple, it's irrelevant, because God's home is declared to be with his people.

But Rome? The Empire? "Babylon the Great?" It's over. John says that "God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath." Soon we'll see in detail what happened: We'll see the three parts of the great city splitting up, as we look at the responses of three parts of the population: Kings, Merchants, and Traders.

Bridging the Gap: Remembering

So, remember how Apocalyptic as a genre "works." The visions of Apocalyptic writing give language to the needs and hopes of persecuted people. Revelation is supposed to persuade us. It's supposed to persuade us.

If by this point in the book we are not persuaded of some things--well, what things? Right?

That Rome is demonic, its power comes from the devil, and the reason the Empire is shaped the way it is shaped is entirely because the devil is angry at Jesus' followers, and the devil has used Rome to get at the Lamb's sealed ones.

Rome's emperors are, quite literally, tools. They're tools in the hands of the devil. And they might think they are gods, and claim they've saved the whole world, and persuade people to worship them for it...but their lies are lies, not truth.

The devil was kicked out of heaven, and even though the Empire thinks it is secure and safe, it's not, because the power that it rests upon is going to be kicked out from under it when the devil loses.

And what Revelation promises is that this will happen. This flip-book of pictures we've seen, as God has roused himself in the heavenly Temple, and begun to act on behalf of his people: it will happen.

Bridging the Gap: Problems?

Rome doesn't exist anymore, right? Just a city-state, a small place: the Empire broke apart a long, long time ago. And long before the Empire was worn away, emperor-worship ended. Christians didn't have to worry anymore about being marked by the Beast, because the Beast didn't mark anybody. Christians didn't have to worship anyone but the Lamb.

But the devil, clearly, has not been completely defeated. I don't think any of us believe the world around us is free of evil or the devil's influence. We wouldn't have prayer requests if it was. And if sin were completely absent from this world, you wouldn't see much of me around.

But John sure does seem to be talking about the end of the world, doesn't he? I mean, he really does. And so it feels like we're forced to ask, "When is this going to happen?" It feels like we're forced to expect that these things we see, down to the detail, are yet to happen, and will occur in some real way.

I think, though, that we forget to think like John thinks. We forget to view the world the way John views the world.

Bridging the Gap: Two Things & John's Emphasis

We forget two things: that John was writing to his Roman churches first, and while this book is relevant for us, it's first relevance was for them. We also forget that as far as the Roman Empire--and we should probably say John & John's readers--the whole world was Rome.

This is true in two ways: first of all, just sort of "psychologically," our world tends to be what is around us, not what is far away. This is increasingly less true; we're more aware of global things than ever before. But it's still largely true, at least emotionally. For John's readers especially, who lived in cities full of Rome's declaration of its own importance, and had no internet or tv, Rome was the world.

And secondly, this is true because much of the Empire's propaganda was related to how they had brought peace on the world, the *Pax Romana*. They ruled the world, and united everyone, and brought security and promise. Sure, there were some enemies across the river, but what of them?

John's emphasis here is on the end of the Empire, the end of Babylon the Great City, whose power is devilish power, and who is a Christian killer. I don't think John can talk about the end of this evil Empire without also talking about *both* the end of the World *and* the end of the devil.

At some point here his focus shifts: it's not just Rome that's

ending, it's everything, because God is going to make all things new.

John has been influenced by Micah, by Joel, By Zephaniah, by Zechariah: these apocalyptic books have shaped him. And each of them--especially Joel, but all of them, really--give voice to the common Jewish expectation that before evil goes down, there will be some great conflict between God and the enemies of God (Keener, 396; cf. n.16). The Day of the Lord that John is bringing to mind when he talks about "Armageddon," is a day that will end the devil's power on earth, because all the people who the devil has duped into relying on his power, instead of God's power--his puppets--they're going to go down.

So at some point, John's vision of the end of Rome and it's power really does blend into a vision of the end of all evil. Rome fell, in many ways: it's power taken: but the world hasn't ended right? John's not wrong, he's not mistaken: his focus just moves past Rome, and looks toward the end of all things. And the promise that God will take out evil permanently makes it even more believable & sure that God will deal with the evil that's overwhelming us right now.

In Revelation 19 & 20, we'll see a vision of the final end of evil that we look forward too. But right now we can't forget that for all the minute details, and the strong emphasis on the particular that we see in Revelation, what's most important is the broad message, the promise that John is being given and is passing on.

The message is this: The Temple is opening, God is at work judging evil right now, even if it doesn't seem that way to

us--whether we're the ones crying out from under the altar, or crying out with frustration in Central Ohio.

John promises his first readers that the Empire's days of power and antagonism against the people of God will end, but the final end of evil certainly hasn't come yet. We are still waiting for the sun to set on the Day of the Lord, and look forward to the sun's rise on a new day in a world so good we can't right now imagine it.

Into Advent:

It's basically impossible for us to maintain the level of anticipation that they were living under. We're just not where they were at, right? We're not being killed for our faith.

But we do need to remember that Jesus is coming back, that final rewards and judgments are guaranteed. They clearly haven't happened yet. We're called to celebrate the triumph of the Lamb that has already happened...but to live carefully, cautiously, and costly lives because it's not yet complete.

Bridging the Gap: Questions

We've talked about so much in Revelation:

How the book is structured; John & the Asian Churches' context; Piles of interesting facts and clarifying explanations. But really, we've been making some of the same points over and over and over, asking the same questions over and over and over. We're bound to have noticed this by now. And I would apologize for the repetition, except that we don't get the chance to ask the sort of

questions we've been asking. Life doesn't invite us to ask pointed Revelation questions:

Do you believe we are under attack by a calculating personal evil being? And what does the answer to that question mean for you?

Do you believe that God is in the process of overcoming evil right now? And what does the answer to that question mean for you?

Do you believe that what we worship matters? That where your time and your money goes reveals what you really value? And what do the answers to these questions mean for us?

Why do we so desperately want a word from on high?

Why do we forget that we are a part of a large faith story?

Why do we forget that we will die, and that the end is always near for any one of us, whether or not "final judgment" happens soon or later?

Bridging the Gap: Answers

The answers we give to these questions determine so much for us. Revelation is out to change the way we look at and experience the world. It's a crazy agenda, and except for the fact that by the Spirit, it really does work occasionally, John would be nothing but crazy, too. But instead, he was brilliant--or our God behind him was--because John left this book, this letter, that we can enter into for a time, and when

we leave it, leave differently.

Revelation has an unusual power to make us question what we see around us, and if we spend time with it, an unusual power to shape us--maybe because we're just so unfamiliar with the thing, it still has a new, unusual voice.

The seven judgments of Revelation are finished now. If we aren't persuaded to avoid the Beast and the devil that stands behind it, it is too late for us. We'll see who we'll grieve alongside as we move forward next week.

Extras:

The Bowl Judgments:

The first few plagues echo the Exodus plagues: painful sores on "those who had the mark of the beast and who worshiped its image" (16:1-2). The sea turns into blood, echoing the Exodus plague that turned the Nile into blood; but this is the "blood of a corpse," a dead-body's blood, and everything in the sea dies (16:3). And all the water sources follow suit, turning to blood: and the "angel of the waters," the supernatural being entrusted to care over the waters of the earth--we don't think in terms of this stuff, but John did--tells God that this is a reasonable thing to do, because "they"--the Roman Empire--"shed the blood of saints and prophets, [so] you have given them blood to drink." This is an extreme "you reap what you sow," image, right? You drink what you produce: the Empire has been a puppet in the hands of the devil, who sought to destroy the Lamb's followers, and now it has to drink what it has been brewing (16:4-7).

The fourth judgment brings the sun close, brings great heat: but of course, “they did not repent and give him glory.” By the time these judgments occur, the cement has hardened, repentance isn’t really expected or an option (16:8-9).

“The fifth angel poured his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness,” and people curse “the God of heaven” (16:10-11).

Frog Spirits:

About these “unclean spirits”--this is a phrase we see all throughout the gospels, where it’s used, straightforwardly, for demons, agents who act on behalf of the devil. (NIB, 677). The idea that they look like frogs echoes--like so many of the judgments that take place in Revelation--the plagues that came upon Egypt (ibid.). These frog-spirits are probably supposed to represent the persuasive propaganda that the enemies of the Lamb continue to spout (cf. Keener, 384ff.). These spirits serve especially to gather other enemies of God to Rome’s side...(Near Conclusion: So when we saw him talking earlier about the frog-spirits gathering kings together to fight some great battle: it’s a battle against the Lord, that he’s talking about.)