

The Book of Revelation

Session 6: The Judgement of God (Chpts 14-16)

These next three chapters encompass the true “end” or judgment of God. Throughout the final set of sevens, the seven bowls, and the consequences of these bowls, God’s judgment will be revealed to the world. The finality of God’s judgment concludes in chapters 17-18 with the fall of Babylon and the great war. These chapters 4-16 are the preparation and explanation of God’s judgment and the final revelation.

The Harvest (chapter 14)

Chapter 14 doesn’t seem to follow thematically with the previous chapters or the subsequent chapters. Three chapters ago we met the woman and the dragon who explained the birth of the Messiah and the coming of God as man to save his people. Chapters 12-13 introduced the great deceiver of the world, the beasts, and the havoc they wreaked upon the inhabitants of the world. Chapter 14 begins with a familiar image with some new changes. We are used to the image of the Lamb being in power, but now he’s on a high mountain like Moses. The faithful are gathered around him with the seal or name of God on their foreheads and are singing, but with harps and a new song. The new song indicates victory and triumph, something new has happened. This “new thing” is that God is finally going to save his people. In chapter 7 he marked them, but did not take them. Also in chapters 7 and 8 he made a point about those who died for his sake and are under the altar. The implication of chapter 14 is that the holy ones, the 144,000 and the many martyrs have been on the earth this entire time watching the great destruction and being enticed by the beast. Now God is going to bring them to the Heavenly court and protect them from these final trials, the true judgment of God, which will become more apparent in chapter 15.

We need to note some of the glaring differences between chapter 14 and the rest of the Book of Revelation thus far. The Lamb is now standing on a mountain, namely Mount Zion, the home of the living God. Mount Zion was also Temple Mount and the house of God. But the symbolism of the Lamb standing on a mountain should not be lost on us: Moses proclaimed God from a mountain. The Lamb is the new Moses calling his people to himself and manifesting God’s presence to the world. Notice the differences between the 144,000 and those worshipping the beast. The 144,000 are joyfully singing a special song and no longer face torments, the worshippers of the beast are carefully following his precepts and living on earth below with all the normal human activities.

Who are the virgins? Given the context, John’s idea of virgins does not mean those who are unmarried. Instead these are the people who are pure before God, they have washed their robes in the blood of the lamb, and they have remained unstained of the worldly pollution of idolatry. Hence “on their lips no deceit has been found” (14:5). A return to the theme of idolatry as the greatest of all evils.

A new angel emerges with new news: “everlasting good news to those who dwell on the earth.” What is this good news? It’s not the Gospels. The Gospels proclaim that Jesus is Lord and Savior

who redeemed the world. Now a new type of good news is proclaimed to the people: God is seated for judgment. Most of us would not consider God's judgment as a good thing or a cause for good news. Think of it this way. The great accuser, those who are defying God's will, those who are seducing the people will now come to an end; the truth of the world will be revealed; we can now be at peace knowing that the time of destruction and seduction are over. For those who follow God, this is great news. For those who don't, this is terrible news.

Enter Babylon the Great. This passage begins the theme of Babylon and the fall of Babylon, which will conclude in chapters 17 and 18. Babylon was the great Babylonian city that conquered the Israelites and sent them all into slavery. Therefore Babylon is depicted as the epitome of evil, of slavery, of sin, and of defiance of God's ways. Here Babylon will be depicted as a woman and a harlot. She requires the people of the world to drink her poison and wine of her passion or encourages them to turn away from God towards her and believe her teachings. The angels try to oppose her and teach the people the right way to act. Those who fear God and worship him alone will be fine. Those who drink Babylon's poison and worship her will feel God's fury. The dark passage ends with a somber yet happy note: "Here is what sustains the holy ones who keep God's commandments and their faith in Jesus" and "let them find rest from their labors, for their works accompany them."

God's wrath or fury. This new theme is our prelude into the seven bowls of chapters 15 and 16. God's fury is the anger and love that pours from him to transform the world. We prefer to think of God's wrath in association with anger or vengeance. But think about the nature of God. Isn't God a loving God who is always shown to be deeply in love with his people? Therefore the wrath of God is better pictured as an outpouring of his love on the world that manifests evil thoughts, terrible feelings of the heart, and physical signs of defiance to God. This is God's wrath, which will be depicted by the seven bowls.

The image shifts suddenly to someone in a cloud: God. This time God is holding a sickle, an instrument used for the harvest of grain. What is he harvesting? Souls. After everything that has happened thus far, now it is time to harvest the people from the earth and begin the great end. Notice the agricultural imagery. The earth has been growing its produce and now it is time to reap the produce. But the only produce that is reaped is grain and grapes, the same elements used in the Mass. The grain are the good people of the earth. The grapes are the evil ones who must be pressed in the wine press and fermented before they can be used. Notice the wine press is outside the city, the same place where Jesus was crucified. The imagery here is very challenging. Obviously the wheat are the faithful of God who survived the great trials and are now glorifying God in Heaven. But what about the grapes? The grapes are characterized as the "evil ones" or maybe "the sinful ones." Let's explore both images. If the grapes are the "evil ones," then God has sent his fury upon them to crush them into grape juice and most likely wine, the drink of cheer and joy. This indicates that the grapes are those who are wicked and by law must be dealt with outside the city. The implication is that the evil ones will be pressed to their death or end and this is the force of God's fury upon their wickedness. Sin is now transformed into a drink of cheer and joy. What if these are the "sinful ones"? In this case they would be purified and made into something of cheer and joy. The connection to "outside the city" means that they are

connected with the grace of the Cross and made into something new. This could be an example of purgatory: a place where you feel God's wrath until you are purified enough for Heaven. Most commentators suggest that the correct interpretation is the first one: these are the wicked ones. But the details suggest that God needs these people for something. The most striking detail about those who are pressed in the wine press is the flow of the story. At this point in the story God has not condemned the world but has worked to save or convert as many people as possible. The next two chapters are the outpouring (pun intended) of God's wrath upon those who have absolutely refused to repent and to afflict them with the plagues of their wickedness. Those who are taken from the world in the rapture of chapter 14 are the holy ones of God who are saved from the impending doom of the seven bowls of God's wrath. Therefore we should interpret those who are being pressed in the wine press as also those who are being saved and protected by God as his holy ones.

The Seven Bowls and the Seven Last Plagues (chapter 15)

Unlike the seven seals and the seven trumpets, the seven bowls begin as a sign similar to the woman and the dragon, the beasts, and the harvest. These first lines are hard to grasp. The sign is great and awe-inspiring. The only signs thus far which are "great" and "awe-inspiring" is the manifestation of God in the Temple with the Arc of the Covenant. Therefore we must connect this sign with the manifestation of God. As God has continually revealed himself, or at least more of himself, following the seven seals and the seven trumpets, this last revelation means something more. God is continually unveiling himself with the hopes that his great and awe-inspiring presence would change the thoughts and hearts of the people. Alas, it does not.

A new song is sung. I hope by now you realize the value of singing and songs. The Book of Revelation is full of songs and is the people's main reaction to the wonder of God is to sing a song of praise to him. This new song encompasses more of the story: they sing about their victory over the beast, its image, and its number (new to the Book). Each subsequent victory adds more things the people of God are victorious over. At first they triumphed over the challenges of their times, then they triumphed over the destruction of nations, kings and peoples, then they triumphed over the beast, now the beast and its image and its number.

We cannot dismiss this final image of chapter 15. Another vision: the tent of God. Literally the Temple and more specifically the Arc of the Covenant. We have returned to Exodus imagery and the people who wandered in the desert seeking the Promised Land. For most of this book the Temple has been open and John freely sees those things that are happening in the Temple. Now the Temple appears to be closed. We have to wonder, why? Recall: the people of God have been raptured and only those who fought against God and worshipped the beast are left of the earth. Does the closure of the Tent or the Temple indicate that God is not allowing any more people into Heaven? Does it indicate that God has hidden himself so that the next plagues could devastate the world in a new way? Have the graces of God been *closed* to the world? We are not sure. We may have to wait to understand the reason the Temple is now closed to the world. Out from the Temple comes the seven angels with the seven last plagues. Even though the next chapter is about the seven bowls, the seven bowls and the seven plagues are the same thing. The clean white linens and gold sashes have a priestly ring as well as a image of royalty. These

angels are very important and about to perform an important task. The image of the bowls filled with God's fury recalled the voice of the psalmist in Psalm 75: "Yes, a cup in the Lord's hand/ foaming wine, fully spiced./ When God pours it out,/ they will drain it even to the dregs;/ all the wicked of the earth must drink."

Now we have our answer. God's Temple is so filled with his glory that no one can enter until the plagues have ended. Namely God in his desperate love for the world must finish calling people to himself and allowing these final plagues before he can allow more people in. It's a weird image but if we think about the nature of God, it works.

The Seven Bowls (chapter 16)

Now God's fury is unleashed upon the world and we must pause to wonder about this fury.

1st bowl – fester wounds – 6th plague against Egypt Exodus 9:8-12

2nd bowl – polluted sea water – 1st plague of Egypt Exodus 7:14-24

3rd bowl – polluted drinking water – 1st plague of Egypt Exodus 7:14-24

4th bowl – sun burns the people – 7th Plague of Egypt Exodus 9:13-35 ?

5th bowl – darkness – 9th plague of Egypt Exodus 10:21-29

Overall, 10 plagues have ravaged the world since the start of the visions. These 10 plagues are supposed to represent two things: a recall of the great deeds against the land of Egypt, the oppressor of the people and the fulfillment, indicated by the number 10, of God's wrath upon the world. Although some may contest that the Book of Revelation has had more than 10 plagues thus far, only 10 are named as plagues. The rest are merely destructive events. Many of these plagues need some explanation. The first plague inflicts ugly sores upon the people. Those who are spiritually sick can manifest their spiritual sickness in physical ways. These plagues that God inflicts upon the earth are not merely physical plagues but also spiritual plagues. They make people aware of their own sinfulness and manifest their sinful behaviors in physical ways. In a similar way, these plagues will represent the four-fold divisions of the world: earth, sea, rivers, and heaven.

The second and third bowls have the same effect: they turn the water to blood. Then the holy ones cry out about the justice of this plague: "For they have shed the blood of the holy ones and the prophets/ and you have given them blood to drink;/ it is what they deserve." The hymn that separates the second and third bowl is odd compared to the rest of the hymns. Not only does this hymn describe God's actions as just and true but reshapes the language used to describe God: "who are and who were." The future is omitted in this hymn. The reason is simple: this is the future and there is no more future after this point only the present. Once God finished these last plagues history is complete, there is no more future only the present. The timeline of the book has been given to us in subtle ways.

The fourth and fifth angels cause devastating darkness. At first the sun doesn't go dark but burns the people. The only way this could happen is if the atmosphere is gone. Instead of our sins being

reflected in our bodily flesh, they are now manifested in nature; nature has changed because of our sinfulness. The Book of Job echoes in these passages. After Job was inflicted with boils and many torments, his wife encourages him to curse God and die. This action of cursing God becomes the way the people think that they will be released from these punishments. Job knows better and so do the holy ones of God. You curse God and greater punishments come. By staying firm and trusting, God will manifest himself, like he did to Job, and allow you to repent and be saved. The people of the world simply need the humility to turn to God and everything will be fine. With the fifth angel and the fifth bowl the *kingdom* is plunged into darkness. We could expand the notion of the kingdom to the entire world since the beast controls the entire world at this point. This darkness is so brutal that people cause themselves greater pain due to its consuming darkness. This darkness could be compared to spiritual darkness where a person is so consumed with themselves and their own ideologies that they cannot *see* the world as it is. These people are so consumed with themselves that the world around them is immense darkness. Notice some differences between the three sets of seven. The fifth seal and the fifth trumpet were a pause in the midst of the action. They showed God's actions towards his holy ones. The fifth bowl was just as bad as the fourth bowl.

The sixth bowl more closely resembles the pause in action caused by the fifth seal and trumpet. Instead of God manifesting himself or his holy ones in this sixth "plague," the world shows itself. This last plague, which is a little perplexing, causes the nations of the world to rise up against God. Namely the leaders of the world unite and unite their armies to try to fight against God, his holy ones, and Heaven. I'm not sure how they plan to win, but they are mustering their forces. The "Kings of the East" are the Parthians or the kingdom dreaded by the Roman Empire. Every bad thing came from the East. To show the evil of this new empire, the beast(s) release frogs from their mouths, which are demonic or unclean spirits. These demonic frog spirit things rally the kingdoms of the world and entice them to war claiming to be prophets and performing signs, which we already saw with the beasts.

What are the people of the world to do? Nothing. Almost nothing. The main goal is to not be seduced by the language and signs of the frogs nor by the rhetoric of the kings who want to start this all our war. Instead God tells his people exactly what they ought to do. Those who are still on the earth must stand firm and watch. The advice is not passive; we are not to sit still and wait but to diligently watch for that pivotal moment when God comes. As Jesus made clear in several of his parables about the kingdom. The phrase "keep clothes ready" is not clear. Either it means to not run around naked but to be prepared or to keep an extra set of clothes around so that you may not be found naked on that day.

Armageddon. I cannot ignore this word even though it doesn't have much importance in the book. Whenever a place is named, we should pause and ask about its significance. Armageddon comes from two words *ar* – mount or mountain and *Megiddo* – or the house of Megiddo. The Mountain of Megiddo is rarely mentioned in Scripture. It's a small mount in the Jezreel valley. During the time of Deborah the prophet, the Canaanite Kings used this mountain as a staging ground for their battle against the Israelites.

The seventh bowl. Once the bowl is poured the famous words are pronounced: "it is done." The word used in Greek is complicated. It literally means, "it has come" but can take on other meanings as well such as "it is done" or "it has become." Since it is in the perfect tense, the word implies that this is an enteral and completed action that has changed the course of history: God's wrath is complete. Like the other manifestations of God, or theophanies, the seventh bowl is followed by great signs in the earth: earthquake. This earthquake was so great that it split the city in three and was the greatest there ever was, in sharp contrast to the other earthquakes who killed people or destroyed a tenth of the city. God fury from the seventh bowl is so great that the islands fled, whatever that means, and the mountains disappeared. Even with the awesome and extreme events of this final plague, the people still blaspheme God. I think there is some wisdom in the people's response. Job's wife thought that if Job blasphemed God that he would die and then be released from this curse. Although people "die" throughout the Book, do they really die? All are alive in God and God seems to keep everyone alive. I think the implication is that people cannot die until they repent and are among the elect. Until that point they keep thinking they can die but God will not allow them to simply go into the void. God's love prevents death until the time has come. Those on earth are now in the epitome of Hell: they are fighting God every step of the way and are refusing life and love.