

Sermon  
“The Seven Bowls of Wrath!”  
Discipleship for Today, Part 19  
Revelation 15-16  
July 18, 2010

## **Introduction Before the Sermon**

Throughout this study you have heard me repeat my belief that Revelation is not so much an end-times guide meant to unlock the secrets of the future to the especially spiritual, but a discipleship handbook meant to encourage all of us to live faithfully as His disciples in the midst of a broken world.

And that it does so not so much by revealing new truth, but rather the truth of the gospel ... presented in a new way – through the use of vivid, symbolic imagery which present this truth not so much systematically, but more like a painting – it pictures truth. And so instead of simply asserting God is sovereign, we are shown a throne in heaven – with Someone – the Someone – sitting on it. Instead of simply stating, “Jesus died for our sins” we are shown a Lion who is also a slain little lamb. Instead of a systematic theology of evil, we are shown a picture of a dragon and two beasts out to control the world and to hurt God’s people.

Today we are shown a fuller picture of something we’ve already seen in Revelation – the “wrath” of God. Let’s listen to the Word

of the Lord from Rev. 15:1-4, though I encourage you to keep your Bibles open to chapters 15-16 for our study together.

*Read Revelation 15:1-4*

## **Introduction**

Today we are studying what our text calls the “*seven bowls of wrath*.” Now truthfully, “wrath” is not something we gravitate toward talking about. I didn’t get home from Minneapolis last week and say, “Whoopie! I get to speak about wrath!” Hardly.

But the truth is this – we need to study wrath, for a number of different reasons. First, “wrath” is an important biblical concept, found throughout Scripture – and indeed in every book in the New Testament<sup>1</sup>! Second, “wrath” is something many of us have some misconceptions about. And third, I believe we need to talk about it because as we do, we hear the good news – the gospel – as well.

Our text this morning is bracketed – book-ended, if you would – with wrath. It begins by telling us that with the seven bowls (15:1) “*God’s wrath is completed*,” and ends by referencing (16:19), “*the fury of his wrath*.” In between (after a vision of God’s people

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<sup>1</sup> Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge*, pg. 284.

which we looked at two weeks ago) we see the pouring out, one by one, of each of the bowls.

Now part of the reason we struggle with wrath is because we associate it with the emotional outbursts of vengeful anger that we humans are known for, and then transfer such human images to God. I googled “wrath of God” this week and found an online game in which the player plays God. It starts off by saying, “You are God. Your people have angered you greatly, and deserve to be punished. Punish away, oh Great One.” A cloud then appears with a lightning bolt attached to it, and using your mouse, you aim it at animals and people. Then, when you push a button, the lightning bolts shoots and blows up people and animals! Really! I considered putting it up on the screen, but thought better of it.

This kind of expression of anger is not – I repeat *is not* – what Revelation means when talking about God’s wrath. It isn’t about God losing it because He is hurt, because He wants revenge, or because He wants to show off His power. Instead, the reality described by the seven bowls of wrath is what scholar Leon Morris calls God’s “*strong and settled opposition to* all that is *evil*” – it is

a “burning zeal for the right coupled with a perfect hatred for everything that is evil.<sup>2</sup>”

Again, this opposition is not an emotional outburst, but the natural consequence of who God is – His nature. God is perfectly holy, perfectly just – indeed perfectly “perfect.” And so, because of this God has to oppose what is evil, what is unjust, what is sinful. Just as light eliminates darkness by its very presence because of the nature of light and darkness, so God because of the very nature of holiness must oppose evil.

Which brings me to this - notice where the seven angels who pour out the seven bowls of wrath come from (15:5). They come “*out of the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony.*” Now, the “*tabernacle of the Testimony*” was the tent where on the Holy God revealed Himself to His people on their way to the Promised Land. It was also the place where the stone tablets on which God wrote the Ten Commandments were contained.

It is from this tabernacle – from the place that represents God’s holiness expressed in His moral code – that these agents of God’s

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

wrath emerge – indicating that *the bowls of wrath are a consequence of violating God's law*.

This is not legalistic vengeance by God. This isn't about God setting up some arbitrary rules and then punishing people when they don't follow them. Rather the picture here is of the consequences of human actions – bad things happen when we go against God's design for our lives. Put water in a car's gas tank, and try to run it, and there are natural consequences – bad ones. Live contrary to God's design as human beings, and there are natural consequences – bad ones.

E Stanley Jones put it this way: “God's law is not so much an imposition, but an exposition.” That is, God's law is not something God arbitrarily set up for humanity to have to follow, but is instead an exposition of what it means to be human. Violate this, and we violate ourselves and reality – and ruins ourselves and our world.

Which explain why our world is such a mess. We are living in a world that is facing the natural consequences of violating God's law. We are not living as God designed – not living out His moral law. We covet (breaking the tenth commandment), which leads to

a world where we are never satisfied, and want more and more. Truth (the focus of the ninth) becomes something we tell only when it is to our advantage. God's good gift of sexuality (the seventh) becomes distorted— bringing not only heartache, but all kinds of brokenness in relationships. We hate and lash out at our fellow and sister human beings (which Jesus' says is the focus of the sixth) in order to get what we want. All because we have sought to control our own lives rather than allowing Him the central place as Lord that He deserves (the first commandment). Human sin results in a broken world which brings on itself God's wrath.

Which brings me to this third thing I want us to see about *the bowls of wrath* – about how they fit with parallel images in Revelation, and in particular, how with them, they *help* us *interpret this broken world*.

You've probably noticed if you've been paying attention that there are some significant similarities in the judgments we've studied already in Revelation – the seven seals of chapter six, the seven trumpets starting in chapter 8, and now the seven bowls – especially between the last two, where the first of both effect the

earth, the second of both the sea, the third the rivers, the fourth the sun, the fifth evil, the sixth the Euphrates river.

And so instead of seeing these as three different sets of seven actions – as in 21 separate events that happen in some kind of sequence – I agree with the many scholars who see all three as helping interpret the harsh realities we face in this world, but from a different perspective and with a different emphases – emphases we’ve already seen.

The seven *seals*, we saw, showed us evil’s response to Jesus’ coming and establishing His kingdom – which helped us understand *why Christians suffer*. Why? Because although God has won the victory in Christ, God is delaying the final consummation of His victory and in the meantime evil is fighting back and God’s people are at the center of His attack.

Of course the question we might ask is, “Why the delay?” That’s what was answered in the seven *trumpets* – *why God allows* this *brokenness* in our world. For what we saw is that the trumpets are a sign of judgment, yes, but also a symbol of grace. Their limited scope of judgment (seen in the fraction 1/3) is meant to sound a warning to humanity – to help people see that things are not as

they should be – and in so seeing become aware of their need for God and find the life Jesus came to bring. The trumpets are a picture of God delaying final judgment and warning people through the brokenness of the world in order to allow time for the world to repent and turn back to Him!

In the meantime – in the between time – between now and when Jesus returns bringing the final judgment, God’s people are called to be faithful witnesses even in the midst of the great tribulations we face in this world, in order to help others find Jesus.

Which brings me to the seven bowls. What they remind us of is that there will be an end – a final end – they *point to the “finish” of God’s wrath*. That God’s delay of judgment will not go on forever – that there will come a time when history ends and the final judgment of all of humanity comes.

We see this first in that, like with the word “wrath,” the section is bookended with the concept of “finished.” We are told at the beginning (15:1), “*God’s wrath is completed*”- from the Greek *teleo* – “*finished*.” And then at the end, with the pouring out of the seventh bowl, a loud voice proclaims, “*It is done!*” With the bowls, God’s wrath is done! Finished!

We also see this pointing to the final end in the progression we find in our texts. In the seven seals, we read of the fourth horseman having authority over  $\frac{1}{4}$  the earth. The seven trumpets up this, and speak of  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the earth burned, the stars destroyed, humanity killed, etc. But notice what we see in the seven bowls. It is no longer  $\frac{1}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{3}$  – there are no more fractions. Instead, it is totality. The whole sea will turn to blood. The same with all the rivers and springs. Totality. Final. God’s wrath is “finished.”

And yet even in its totality, the image of the bowls is meant to warn, right? It does so by *confronting us with wrath’s severity* – and in so doing, pushing us to look more closely at our lives and make a decision about Jesus. It is not something to delay thinking about. Decide now!

Now as with all the images of Revelation, we have to be careful not to interpret them too literally. For instance, Jesus was pictured with seven horns and seven eyes. When we see Him, will we see a seven-horned, seven-eyed being? No, but we will recognize Him as all-powerful (seven horns) and all-wise (seven eyes). A symbol of truth. In the same way, we are not to go looking for angels

pouring awful stuff onto the earth. They are images – images meant to help us comprehend the awful reality of judgment.

And the images are awful. Painful sores on those who have chosen to follow the beast. The sea turned to blood – followed by all of earth’s water. A torturous scorching sun. All to help us see the emptiness and pain of living apart from God and His desires for our lives.

Then comes darkness, and finally, one last desperate attempt of evil at a place the NIV translates as “Armageddon” to rebel against God.

Now, a few words on the much hyped “Battle of Armageddon.” First, the popular interpretations you might hear that point to a mega-world war against God go way beyond what I think what the text is meant to tell us. For one, there is no clear-cut place this verse is referring to, for it is unclear what the word translated Armageddon actually is. The Greek transliteration of the Hebrew “Har-megiddo” which means “mount of Megiddo” has been postulated, and makes some sense because there is a Megiddo in Scripture where King Josiah of Judah lost an important battle against Egypt (2 Kings 23), which would make the image here one

of a great reversal of history. However, Megiddo is in a valley, and there is no mountain near it.

Second, and more importantly, while a big deal is made in the text about how the forces of evil gather together to battle against God, the important thing to see is that no battle is actually fought. Rather, God's power is emphasized by showing Him winning simply by showing up and proclaiming, (16:17), "*It is done.*"

And so probably the best way to see this is not as an actual final end of the world battle where the world comes together against God, but simply as a symbol of the end – and that together with the other bowls of wrath, the bowls point to the eternal emptiness, purposelessness, aloneness that comes from choosing the way of the dragon and the beasts and rebelling against the God of the universe.

Which brings me to these final things we learn from the seven bowls. First, *we are reminded of the justness of judgment* – "*You are just in these judgments...*" proclaims the third angel (16:4). Just. Not pouring out judgment arbitrarily or capriciously ... but only pouring out (16:6), what "*they deserve*" – literally the phrase communicates this thought sarcastically – "*they are worthy.*"

God here is not shown as excessive. Not getting even, or proving His might. Rather, He is doing what is right – what is just – because He is just.

Second, we are reminded, even in the midst of the totality of the judgment expressed here, of God’s real heart – that ***God’s desire is for repentance.***” Even in the picture of the end, we hear God’s sadness that they did not turn reflected in (16:9 and 11) where we read that the people “*refused to repent.*”

While as a just God He must deal with evil and rebellion and sin, God’s desire is not to punish. Remember, the penalty for sin was paid by the Lamb of God slain for the sin of the world. Instead, this picture is meant to confront us with the awful reality of wrath, in hopes that seeing it will bring us to repentance. This is God’s heart – for us to turn from sin and return to Him.

Which leads into this last thing I want us to remind us of – of the gospel – the good news. For by and perhaps in this text ***we are reminded of another way God’s wrath is “finished.”***

As I mentioned, in Rev. 15:1, John says that the bowls are the last expression of God's wrath, because with them His wrath is "*completed.*" This comes from the Greek *teleo* ... "*finished.*"

This word is directly related to a word used in another book of the Bible attributed to the same John I take as the author of Revelation – in the gospel of John, vs. 19:30. There we read that Jesus last words before He died on the cross were, "*It is finished.*"

Whether or not as some scholars think this is an intentional reference by John, it is still true that these two "finishes" are connected. For the bowls of wrath warn us of the awful reality of the coming judgment; the cross reminds us of the awful judgment Jesus bore for us so we don't have to face the coming judgment.

There is a way out of the coming wrath. It is to trust in the one who came to die on our behalf and said, "It is finished." What is finished? God's strong and settled opposition to evil –satisfied by Him bearing His wrath Himself in the person of Christ. What is finished? God's burning zeal for right coupled with God's perfect hatred of evil – brought together in Jesus death for us. What is finished? Everything! Everything that needs to be done for us to enter a relationship with a Holy God. Darrell Johnson puts it this way:

The voice from the throne, in the seventh bowl, that cries out, “It is done” is the same voice that cries from the cross, “It is finished.” The One who sends forth the seven angels is the One who so loves the world, that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, should not come under judgment, but have eternal life.”

So how are we to respond to this section of Revelation? By recognizing God’s justness in judgment, by repenting of our desire to live on our own and apart from His ways, and then by abandoning ourselves to Him, trusting in His grace to save us from what we deserve. No matter who you are, no matter what you’ve done – especially if you’ve never come to Him before – that is our call to today.

Let’s talk to Him about it right now. Let’s pray.