



Revelation - Chapter Sixteen

VI Revelation 15:1-16:21 - God's final wrath **(continues/concludes)**

Summary of Chapter Sixteen

John then heard from a voice in the temple giving instruction that the seven bowls of the wrath of God should be poured out on the earth. The first angel then poured out his bowl and sores were placed on those who had the mark of the beast and worshiped its image. The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing in the sea died as a result. The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness and people gnawed their tongues in anguish and cursed God. 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.

John was then shown three unclean or demonic spirits like frogs which came out of the mouths of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. These spirits went to the kings of the world to gather them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. The place that they gathered for war is called Harmagedon or Armageddon.

Then the seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, which said: 'It is done!' This caused dramatic cosmic disturbances and great storms on earth that had never previously been witnessed in history.

VI.b Revelation 16:1-21 - The Bowls of God's Wrath

The bowls present varying perspectives on the final destruction of the first heaven and earth. The first four bowls inflict plagues on the same spheres as the first four trumpets (8:7-12): earth, sea, rivers and springs, and sun. The trumpet judgments were limited to one-third of each sphere, but the destruction poured out from the

bowls is total. Unlike the seal and trumpet sequences, no interlude injects delay between the sixth and seventh bowls. The end has come.

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.'

Revelation 16:1

The loud voice from the temple is probably that of God instructing the seven angels to commence his final judgement by pouring out the seven bowls of his wrath on the inhabitants of the earth: <<*Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call on your name*>> (Psalm 79:6), and: <<*Therefore wait for me, says the Lord, for the day when I arise as a witness. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all the heat of my anger; for in the fire of my passion all the earth shall be consumed*>> (Zephaniah 3:8).

² So the first angel went and poured his bowl on the earth, and a foul and painful sore came on those who had the mark of the beast and who worshipped its image.

Revelation 16:2

When the first angel poured his bowl out on the earth, it will afflict not the land itself in contrast to the first trumpet (8:7), but earth's inhabitants, who bear the mark of the beast and who worshipped its image, with foul, i.e. infected, painful sores, similar to the sixth plague on Egypt: <<*Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and let Moses throw it in the air in the sight of Pharaoh. It shall become fine dust all over the land of Egypt, and shall cause festering boils on humans and animals throughout the whole land of Egypt.'* So they took soot from the kiln, and stood before Pharaoh, and Moses threw it in the air, and it caused festering boils on humans and animals. The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils afflicted the magicians as well as all the Egyptians>> (Exodus 9:8-11), and with which the Israelites were warned would be inflicted on them for disobedience to God: <<*The Lord will afflict you with the boils of Egypt, with ulcers, scurvy, and itch, of which you cannot be healed*>> (Deuteronomy 28:27), and: <<*The Lord will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head*>> (Deuteronomy 28:35).

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

Revelation 16:3

The second bowl will turn the waters of the sea into blood, and all sea life will die. The first plague on Egypt: <<*Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river, and all the water in the river was turned into blood, and the fish in the river died. The river stank so that the*

Egyptians could not drink its water, and there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt>> (Exodus 7:20-21), is magnified to universal dimensions.

⁴ The third angel poured his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. ⁵ And I heard the angel of the waters say,

‘You are just, O Holy One, who are and were,
for you have judged these things;

⁶ because they shed the blood of saints and prophets,
you have given them blood to drink.

It is what they deserve!’

⁷ And I heard the altar respond,

‘Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty,
your judgements are true and just!’

Revelation 16:4-7

With the third bowl, the rivers and the springs, i.e. sources of drinking water, will also be turned to blood. It is what they deserve, declares the angel of the waters, referring to those who shed the blood of saints and prophets (17:6). Isaiah 49:26 promises that Israel’s bloodthirsty oppressors will be forced to drink their own blood.

You are just, O Holy One, who are and were, for you have judged these things. God is the righteous judge and his judgements are always just and true, as acknowledged by King David: <<*He judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with equity*>> (Psalm 9:8). As also recorded in 11:17, John does not use the singular ‘is’ and ‘was’ but refers to the plurality of the Godhead by using ‘are’ and ‘were’. Since ‘is to come’ is again omitted there is an understanding that God has now come.

The heart of the judgment hymn is the ironic pronouncement: because they shed the blood of saints and prophets, you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve! The sentiments are similar to those expressed in the Jewish apocryphal work Wisdom of Solomon, reflecting on how the plagues were appropriate to the Egyptians’ sins: <<*In return for their foolish and wicked thoughts, which led them astray to worship irrational serpents and worthless animals, you sent upon them a multitude of irrational creatures to punish them, so that they might learn that one is punished by the very things by which one sins*>> (Wisdom 11:15 NRSV). Wisdom of Solomon makes no mention of the plague that turned the waters of the Nile to blood (Exodus 7:14-25), but in Revelation the same principle applies: those who shed the blood of martyrs are themselves punished with a plague of blood. This is in keeping with the words of Jesus: <<*Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, “I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute”, so that this*

generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be charged against this generation>> (Luke 11:49-51).

The heavenly altar, under which the martyrs' souls pooled like sacrificial blood (6:9), agrees with the angel's judgment, echoing the song just sung by the victors; refer also to 15:3. People will receive from God exactly what they deserve, i.e. Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, your judgements are true and just!

Earlier, there had been a break after the first four trumpets (8:7-12), and the final three with the woes of the flying eagle. Here there is a similar break between the first three bowls and the final four with an interjection by the angel of the waters and the altar. Taken together, the angel's pronouncement and the altar's response form a kind of hymn that begins and ends with an acknowledgment of the justice of God's wrath displayed on the earth.

⁸ The fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire; ⁹ they were scorched by the fierce heat, but they cursed the name of God, who had authority over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory.

Revelation 16:8-9

Unlike the first three plagues, there is no direct correlation here to the plagues brought on Egypt. Instead of darkening the sun (8:12), the fourth bowl will intensify its heat to inflict a terrible foretaste of the coming lake of fire (20:15) on those who defiantly refuse to repent and give God the glory. That it was allowed to scorch people with fire is a clear indication that God retains his authority over the inanimate objects within creation as well as the living creatures.

They cursed the name of God, who had authority over these plagues. This makes it clear that it is God's judgement on his creation for he retains authority but delegates the pronouncement to the angels who serve him. Far from asking God's forgiveness for their sins and the judgement that has now come upon them, they choose to blaspheme him instead.

The only similarity to the Exodus story is the defiance of those who suffered from the plague. However, their reaction here goes well beyond Pharaoh's persistent hardness of heart.

¹⁰ The fifth angel poured his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness; people gnawed their tongues in agony, ¹¹ and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and sores, and they did not repent of their deeds.

Revelation 16:10-11

The fifth bowl shows that the very throne of the beast, and its kingdom is not immune to God's just wrath. Jesus had told his apostles: <<*Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out*>> (John 12:31).

Darkness was the ninth plague on Egypt, the last before the slaughter of the firstborn compelled a heart-hardened Pharaoh to release Israel (Exodus 10:21-29). It is appropriate that a regime founded on deceit: *<<It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all; and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived>>* (Revelation 13:13-14), should be plunged into darkness, as foretold by the prophet: *<<They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods. They will turn their faces upwards, or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness>>* (Isaiah 8:21-22).

They did not repent of their deeds. Although reaping the agony they have sown in rebellion, hardened people will react by cursing their just judge rather than forsaking their self-destroying deeds. The refusal to repent shows the total depravity of those who dwell in the earth and it shows the justice of eternal punishment (20:3-15).

¹² The sixth angel poured his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up in order to prepare the way for the kings from the east. ¹³ And I saw three foul spirits like frogs coming from the mouth of the dragon, from the mouth of the beast, and from the mouth of the false prophet. ¹⁴ These are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty.

Revelation 16:12-14

The sixth bowl is in preparation for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. By indicating the time John also gives away the outcome of this great battle.

The drying up of the great river Euphrates, on which ancient Babylon foolishly relied for defence: *<<who says to the deep, 'Be dry – I will dry up your rivers'>>* (Isaiah 44:27), and: *<<Therefore thus says the Lord: I am going to defend your cause and take vengeance for you. I will dry up her sea and make her fountain dry>>* (Jeremiah 51:36), symbolises God's removal of restraint on Satan's capacity to assemble a global conspiracy against the church (20:7-9). The Euphrates was also the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire, and it kept the Parthians out. Here, John transforms the Roman fear of Parthian invaders into a universal confrontation.

Its water was dried up in order to prepare the way for the kings from the east. This would appear to be another fulfilment of prophecy: *<<I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfil my intention', calling a bird of prey from the east, the man for my purpose from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have planned, and I will do it>>* (Isaiah 46:9b-11). It is also reminiscent of the role played by John the

Baptist preparing for the coming of the Messiah: <<*He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord"', as the prophet Isaiah said*>> (John 1:23).

Three foul spirits emerge like frogs from the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet in order to deceive world rulers with delusions of victory over <<*the Lord and his anointed*>> (Psalm 2:2b), and to assemble them for their final defeat and destruction. This is again an allusion to one of the plagues of Egypt (Exodus 8:2-11).

These are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world. These kings and their armies correspond to the cavalry of the earlier vision heralded by the sounding of the sixth trumpet and, like those demonic forces, bring trouble to the earth in threes: three plagues of fire, smoke and sulphur in the earlier instance (9:18), and here three foul spirits like frogs. Paul had also warned of such evil forces: <<*Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron*>> (1 Timothy 4:1-2). Their testimony is in direct conflict with that of the church: <<*And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come*>> (Matthew 24:14).

Foul spirits is the same term used for unclean spirits in: <<*Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit*>> (Mark 1:23), <<*And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him*>> (Mark 5:2).

¹⁵ ('See, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame.')

Revelation 16:15

See, I am coming like a thief! Between the notation of the time (v.14) and place (v.16) of the battle, John's prophetic voice suddenly gives way to the voice of Jesus himself. It is the first time Jesus has spoken directly since dictating the seven messages of Chapters 2 and 3, and his words sound very much like words from those messages.

Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed. This is Revelation's third of seven benedictions; refer to the supplementary material on the web site. Jesus interjects a summons to spiritual vigilance, echoing his rebukes to the complacent churches of Sardis and Laodicea. Because he is coming like a thief at an unexpected moment (3:3), his soldiers must stay awake and dressed lest they be caught naked, to their shame (3:18).

Again, this verse is a reminder of the teachings of Jesus: <<*Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. 'But know this: if the owner of the house*

had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into'>> (Luke 12:37-39).

¹⁶ And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Harmagedon.

Revelation 16:16

Harmagedon or Armageddon conjures up 21st Century images that are mostly foreign to the book of Revelation, above all the image of global nuclear war. In context it refers to a place for it means 'Mount Megiddo' in Hebrew. In ancient Israel, Megiddo was a plain, not a mountain; but it was also the site of some key battles: <<*The kings came, they fought; then fought the kings of Canaan, at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo; they got no spoils of silver*>> (Judges 5:19), <<*In his days Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt went up to the king of Assyria to the river Euphrates. King Josiah went to meet him; but when Pharaoh Neco met him at Megiddo, he killed him*>> (2 Kings 23:29), and: <<*On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo*>> (Zechariah 12:11), so in the symbolic geography of John's visions it aptly represents the global combat zone (20:9) in which the final conflict between Christ and Satan will be fought.



The South Hills of Megiddo

¹⁷ The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, 'It is done!' ¹⁸ And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a violent earthquake, such as had not occurred since people were upon the earth, so violent was that earthquake. ¹⁹ The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. God remembered great Babylon and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath. ²⁰ And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found; ²¹ and huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds, dropped from heaven on people, until they cursed God for the plague of the hail, so fearful was that plague.

Revelation 16:17-21

The seventh bowl evokes a pronouncement from God's throne, located in the temple: **'It is done!'** This declaration, repeated in 21:6, affirms that God's plan has reached completion (10:7), his wrath against evil is finished (15:1), and his Kingdom is fully come (11:15).

A violent earthquake of unprecedented severity will shatter the great city, the site of Jesus' crucifixion and the murder of his martyrs (11:7-10). It is great Babylon, which rules the 'kings of the earth' (17:18), and to her that God gave the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath.

John describes this earthquake as something such as had not occurred since people were upon the earth, so violent was that earthquake. Jesus, too, used such language in describing the end times: <<**For at that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be**>> (Matthew 24:21), showing it to be clearly a unique event in history. Human civilisation will disintegrate when the Lord comes with lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder (11:19). This is the earthquake foreseen in the sixth seal (6:12-17), which darkens sun and moon, shakes stars from their places, rolls up the sky like a scroll, and displaces the mountains and every island (6:14 with 16:20). This is the flight of the first heaven and earth before God's terrible presence, giving way to a new heaven and earth, unstained by human sin (20:11, 21:1 and 22:3).

The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. Along with Babylon, John also sees the cities of the nations fall. These cities are probably meant to correspond in some way to the kings of the whole world assembled for battle at Harmagedon, but must have also evoked for John's readers the specific cities of Asia where they lived: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Whatever was in store for the respective Christian congregations in each of those cities, John's vision revealed that the cities themselves were doomed to share great Babylon's fate.

Unlike the earthquake attending the opening of the sixth seal in which <<**every mountain and island was removed from its place**>> (6:12-14), now every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found. Such geographic alteration of the

earth's surface would seem to be attended by massive loss of life, attested to by Scripture: *<<I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger. For thus says the Lord: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end. Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back>>* (Jeremiah 4:23-28).

Huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds, dropped from heaven on people. This recalls for one last time the biblical plagues on Egypt (Exodus 9:22-26). God had also warned apostate Israel of such judgements coming upon them: *<<Therefore thus says the Lord God: In my wrath I will make a stormy wind break out, and in my anger there shall be a deluge of rain, and hailstones in wrath to destroy it>>* (Ezekiel 13:13), and: *<<With pestilence and bloodshed I will enter into judgement with him; and I will pour down torrential rains and hailstones, fire and sulphur, upon him and his troops and the many peoples that are with him>>* (Ezekiel 38:22), an early warning of what would eventually befall all who oppose God.

The statement that those on whom the giant hailstones fell cursed or blasphemed God explicitly confirms the responses at the end of the fourth and the fifth bowls, and it serves as a final verdict on the entire series. Like the fearful plagues of the Exodus and like the trumpets, the seven final plagues do not bring repentance.