

Series: 7 Bowls with 7 Plagues (a study in Revelation 15-16)

Sermon Text: 16:1-7 Plague Bowls 1-3

(Use **app** to get

lesson/slides, ask questions)

As we've said, *chapter 15* introduces *chapter 16*. In *15:1* John *saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished*. He saw saints celebrating God's judgment on a heavenly seashore like how Moses and Miriam led Israel in song after their deliverance from Egypt through the Red Sea. These last plague-toting angels were unleashed only after God gave the world ample time to repent. What we're about to read is terribly troubling, yet today's text also communicates this reassuring...

BIG IDEA: God's judgments are always true, just, and deserved.

Let's begin in *verses 1-2* where John wrote: *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." 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*. While this is awful, notice who was impacted and who was not. If you've read Exodus 9, you might recall that the plague of boils affected only unbelieving Egyptians, not believers. It was the same here--only those who sold out to way of the dragon (see chapter 13) were punished, and as always, God preserved those who trust Him. One scholar rightly reminds us "*The divine judgments are designed for the dragon, the beast, and Babylon. Those who align themselves with those things get wrapped up into these judgments. God is crumbling our man-made structures to build his kingdom of peace.*" That's the future for those united by faith with Jesus! Moving on to *verses 3-4* John wrote: *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. The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood*. These images recall when Egypt's Nile River was turned to blood, and Professor NT Wright (p. 142) says "*The point...in these first four plagues is fairly simple. God will allow natural elements themselves (earth, sea, rivers and sun) to pass judgment on the human*

beings who have so grievously abused their position as God's image-bearers within creation. They are supposed to be looking after God's world and caring for one another...But God will call the natural elements themselves to turn on them and judge them for their wickedness." This may be the natural result of our unjust overconsumption and poor stewardship of earthly resources.

Of course, there's disagreement over what this is and when it occurs. The Preterist view of Revelation sees this as the 1st century judgment of citizens in Jerusalem, Rome, or both who sold out to the way of the dragon from chapter 13. One support they cite is Leviticus 26:21 where God told Israel, *"If you walk contrary to me and will not listen, I will strike you sevenfold for your sins."*; and Deuteronomy 28 where God vowed to *"Strike you in the knees and on the legs with severe boils which cannot be healed."* Many Historicists see this as God judging naval (*sea*) forces that supported the Papacy during the French Revolution. Many Futurists see these as literal plagues prior to Christ's 2nd coming because the Exodus plagues were literal. Many Spiritualists see the seals, trumpets, and bowls as different camera angels of the same history between Christ's resurrection and second coming. One may logically ask: "With all the variations in viewpoints, what lessons could we possibly glean from these plagues?"

Notice where **verses 5-7** direct us to focus: ***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. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!" And I heard the altar saying, "Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!"*** So, bottom line: Whether this is past, present or future, an ***angel*** and the souls we met under the ***altar*** in chapter 8 testify here that the Creator is totally ***justified*** to use nature as His executioner at any point in history. Consider this caution though: The disciples were warned not to assume tragedies were divine judgment--we can never say for certain (cf. [Luke 13](#); [John 9](#)). Also realize that people may ask different questions like: "How could a loving God do such things?", "Why is wrath necessary, and is it behavior changing or merely a consequence?", or "Can't people self-correct if given more time?". Those who've suffered or experienced more violence

might ask: “How long oh Lord--when is enough, enough?”. I wonder, “Where do you fall on this scale and why?”

Romans 1:18-20 NIV kicks off a very detailed 8-chapter explanation about why God must judge by saying: “*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*” So, judgment isn’t just a Revelation thing, it’s a historical reality addressed by other biblical authors who affirm the words of **Revelation 16:6--wrath is what they deserve!** In our notes, there’s a helpful chart comparing the 7 bowls with the 7 trumpets and the Exodus plagues. It shows connections between the fire-pouring angels and the talking altar in **Revelation 8** and how each cycle intensified while God offered opportunities to repent before finally judging. Moreover, it proves God’s pattern of extending patient mercy before giving stubbornly unrepentant people, like Pharaoh, ***their just desserts***.

Ultimately, John wants us to see that God’s judgments, whether allowed or sent, are never technically vindictive or cruel, rather as our **Big Idea** states: **God’s judgments are always *true*** (proper, correct, in accord with truth/God’s character), ***just*** (honorable, perfect, equitable, morally right), ***and deserved*** (a reward befitting the cosmic crime). In closing, one other question occurred to me that’s likely to be on our minds here: “If we all deserve judgment for our sins, then how can God pardon our sins and still be true and just?” The short answer is the cross where Jesus took the full wrath of God. The only way to avoid what we all deserve is to follow Jesus closely by faith. As you ponder all this with your people, remember, next steps need not be taken alone--let Christ’s imperfect church be your supportive family!

Sunday to Monday Connection: God’s pattern is to extend patient mercy before giving stubbornly unrepentant people, like Pharaoh, ***their just desserts***. His judgments, whether allowed or sent, are never technically vindictive or cruel, rather they are always just, true, and deserved.

- **Question:** How has this Scriptural pattern played out in your life? What questions would you like God to answer about His justice and judgments?

- **Next Step:** Consider inviting some of your people, your small group, your landmark family into your conversations about these things with God.
- **Note:** If you are not a Christ follower and would like to investigate further what all this might mean for you, please come talk with any of our leaders, or the person who brought you.

Takeaways to discuss with your people (in addition to the underlined questions above!):

1. Where do we see the limits of human justice, and in what ways is divine judgment good news? What responses do you think John desired from churches who contemplate chapters 15-16?
2. When are you tempted to want revenge, and how does Revelation 15-16 enable you to respond differently?
3. Review the 7 blessings (a.k.a. beatitudes) of Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). How do they comfort Christians at any point in history who are facing the threat of empire or are experiencing a world where terrible tragedies and just judgments occur?

Comparing the Trumpet and Bowl Judgments with the Exodus Plagues (Duvall, 214)

Trumpet Judgments	Bowl Judgments	Exodus Plagues
1st—Hail, fire, and blood fall on earth (8:7)	1st—Bowl poured out on earth, and people who worship the beast afflicted with sores (16:2)	6th—Boils (9:8-11) 7th—Hail (9:13-34)
2nd—Burning mountain turns sea to blood, and one-third of sea creatures die (8:8-9)	2nd—Sea turns to blood, and every living thing in it dies (16:3)	1st—Blood (7:14-21)
3rd—Blazing star makes rivers and springs bitter (8:10-11)	3rd—Rivers and springs turn to blood (16:4)	1st—Blood (7:14-21)
4th—Third of sun, moon, and stars darkened (8:12)	4th—Sun scorches people with fire (16:8-9)	9th—Darkness (10:21-23)
5th—Sun and sky darkened, and hoard of scorpion-locusts comes from Abyss (9:1-11)	5th—Kingdom of beast plunged into darkness, and people have pains and sores (16:10-11)	8th—Locusts (10:3-19) 9th—Darkness (10:21-23)
6th—Four angels bound at Euphrates are released with 200 million troops to kill a third of humanity (9:13-16)	6th—Bowl poured out on Euphrates, which dries up so that demonic frogs can assemble kings of world for epic battle (16:12-13)	2nd—Frogs (8:2-14)

7th—Loud voices in heaven announce coming of God's kingdom, followed by opening of God's heavenly temple along with lightning, thunder, earthquake, and hail (11:15, 19)

7th—A loud voice from God's throne announces, "It is done," followed by lightning, thunder, severe earthquake, and large hail (16:17-21)

7th—Hail (9:13-34)

Survivors of the plagues refuse to repent (9:20-21)

People curse God and refuse to repent (16:9, 11, 21)

Pharaoh hardens his heart (Exod. 7:22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34-35; 10:20, 27; 11:10)

Quotes related to this passage:

- **Summary of what's ahead:** "These judgments are total. Before, with the seals and the trumpets, only a part of the world was harmed or destroyed (remember, again, that all this is symbolic), sending a warning signal to those who need to repent. Here that note is absent. This time, everything in the sea dies. All the rivers turn to blood (again, John is drawing on the plagues of Egypt). There is no more space for repentance. These plagues are the beginning of that long process, which will end in chapter 20, by which God will rid his beautiful world, first (in this chapter) of those who have assisted in its destruction and decay, then (in chapters 17 and 18) of the great imperial systems that have set up massive structures of injustice, and finally (chapters 19 and 20) of the dark powers that lie behind those systems themselves, ending (as in 1 Corinthians 15:26-28) with Death and Hades themselves." (Wright, 143)
- **Favoring the preterist view:** "John sees seven angels coming 'out of the temple' (15:6). These angels possess the seven plagues that recall Leviticus 26:21: 'If after this ye should walk perversely, and not be willing to obey me, I will further bring upon you seven plagues according to your sins' (LXX [Brenton]). According to Leviticus, God promises to send plagues on Israel if they commit idolatry. Five times it is repeated that God promises to judge them seven times if the Israelites become unfaithful to the covenant (Lev 15:1, 6, 8; 21:9; 26:21). Each sevenfold expression introduces a successively worse ordeal if Israel refuses to repent from the preceding woe. This is not the first time Revelation mentions a plague, for in 13:3 and 12 the beast receives a 'fatal wound' or, literally, a 'plague.' Christ executes the plague of judgment through his death and resurrection, setting in motion the seven bowl judgments of 15:5-16:21." (Beale 484)
- **Problems with the perspectives:** "Those tempted to apply the judgments one at a time may find trouble differentiating some of them from others; trying to link them with specific past events is even more difficult. This is not to deny that such correlations have often been attempted. Jonathan Edwards recognized the parallels between the plagues on Egypt and those on the Antichrist, but believed that the first bowl was "poured out in the days of Wyclif, Hus, and Jerome of Prague, the second in the Reformation." But we should not read too much into the sequence of individual judgments; they are meant to be read as a series. They presumably do not convey a time line or

history written in advance, but summarize the sorts of judgments God inflicts on humanity; that is, the God who acted powerfully in the Exodus is the God who still acts in history. He still has his Moseses to speak for him (11:5–7), but sends his judgments as long as the world, like Pharaoh, hardens its heart and refuses to stop oppressing people.” (Keener, 398)

- **Terrifying imagery:** In his book “Reversed Thunder” (p. 98) Eugene Peterson wrote, “*The poet puts unlikely images alongside one another and lets them work in our imaginations, as cross-fertilizing metaphors.*” In his book “Theology” (p. 20) Richard Bauckham wrote, “*In the trumpets and bowls, John has taken some of his contemporaries’ worst experiences and worst fears of wars and natural disasters, blown them up to apocalyptic proportions, and cast them in biblically allusive terms. The point is not to predict a sequence of events. The point is to evoke and to explore the meaning of the divine judgment which is impending on the sinful world.*”
- **Verses 3-4:** This verse and 17:6, 16 echo Isaiah 49:26, where God says to Israel, ‘I will feed your oppressors with their own flesh, and they will be drunk on their own blood.’ The nations that fight against God’s people will shed each other’s blood in internecine warfare. Compare Ezekiel 38:21–22, Haggai 2:21–22 and Zechariah 14:12–13 (which also suggests the first and fifth bowl judgments).” (Stern, Re 16:6)
- **Trumpets and bowls compared:** “When viewed alongside the previous trumpet judgments, the differences are few and the similarities many. While the trumpets kill a third of humanity, the bowls bring total destruction, and the bowls also lack the interlude that precedes the final judgment. But both the trumpet and the bowl plagues are patterned after the Egyptian plagues...It appears that the seals, trumpets, and bowls all describe events that occur in the last days, (i.e., the period between the first and second comings of Christ). Although each series recapitulates the same time period, the judgments grow more intense with each (e.g., from $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ to 1), and all deliver us to the very end of history and the last judgment. We are told in 16:9 that God has control over the plagues. In 16:1 the temple voice of God initiates the plagues, while in 16:17 the voice from the throne completes them (i.e., “It is done!”). The verbal thread “great” (megas) occurs eleven times in chapter 16 to emphasize the cosmic magnitude of the battle between God and the forces of evil. With the pouring out of the seventh bowl, God gives Babylon the Great the cup filled with the wine of his wrath (16:18–19), but the details of Babylon’s downfall await Revelation 17–18.” (Duvall, 214-215)
- **A hint about Armageddon:** “The most significant difference between the trumpets and the bowls is the scope of the latter (e.g., all sea creatures die in 16:3, not just one third, as in 8:9), indicating the finality of this judgment. Among the seven bowls is the famous sixth one, with its reference to Harmagedon (NRSV) or Armageddon (16:12–16). Despite the vast amount of speculation regarding the time and location of this battle, Revelation mentions it only in passing. The place name means ‘mountain of Megiddo,’ a city where numerous battles had taken place in the Old Testament. It is a logical setting

for a symbolic battle of cosmic proportions—and nothing more. (Gorman, 142-143)

- **Refining fires of judgment:** “Throughout the Old Testament, God’s holiness is depicted as a fire that consumes all that is unholy. When Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, offered unholy fire before the Lord, the fire of God’s holiness consumed them (Lev 10:1–2). Isaiah spoke of how God (the ‘Light of Israel’) will become a fire, and Israel’s Holy One a flame that will devour the thorns and briars (the unholiness of Israel; Isa 10:17); and the sinners in Israel are afraid, and the godless tremble, for ‘who can live with this devouring fire? ...Who can survive this all-consuming fire?’ (Isa 33:14). In Zechariah the holiness of God is a wall of fire around Jerusalem (Zech 2:5), and for Malachi God’s holiness is like a refiner’s fire (Mal 3:2). This understanding is the basis for the many references that associate God’s wrath with fire (Num 11:1; Pss 78:21; 79:5; Isa 30:27; Jer 4:4; 15:14; Ezek 21:31; Nah 1:6; Zeph 3:8).” (Mulholland, 545)
- **The angel with authority over all water.** “It is not clear if this is the angel who poured the bowl (Beale 1999:817) or another angel. In Jewish tradition, there were ‘spirits’ or ‘spiritual beings’ who were associated with the aspects of the created order (see 1 Enoch 60:16–23; 61:10; 66:2—especially related to water; see Beale 1999:818 for a fuller list of Jewish sources that bear witness to this imagery). John echoes this imagery in the angels who hold back the four winds of the earth (7:1) and in the angel who has authority over fire (14:18). Since John indicates that it is one of the four living beings (4:6–7), who represent the created order (see note on 4:6), who gives the bowls to the angels, God’s sovereignty over the created order is suggested. When Satan’s realm rebels against God, creation itself is adversely affected and experiences the downside of its rebellion. Here is a simple illustration: When someone chooses to ignore the law of gravity and steps off of a 10-story building, inherent in that disobedience is a debilitating or even destructive consequence. John may be indicating something of this reality for fallen Babylon in the water becoming blood. Of course, this image also echoes Moses turning the waters of Egypt into blood (Exod 7:17ff), the consequence of Pharaoh’s rebellion against God’s people.” (Mulholland, 544)
- **Verses 5-7:** “God judges as one who is ‘just and true,’ reflecting the principle known as *lex talionis*, the law of retribution. In other words, God ‘will repay each of you according to your deeds’ (2:23). This theme runs through the Old Testament (e.g., Pss. 28:4; 62:12; Jer. 17:10) and the New Testament (Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 14:12; 2 Cor. 5:10; 11:15; 1 Pet. 1:17), and it surfaces repeatedly in Revelation, with reference to both believers and unbelievers (e.g., 2:23; 11:18; 14:8–10, 13; 16:6; 18:4–8; 20:12–13; 22:12). Throughout the Scriptures, God ‘remembers’ and repays accordingly (16:19; 18:5–6).” (Duvall, 217-218)
- **Positive views of wrath:** “The ‘wrath’ of the creator God consists of two things, principally. First, he allows human wickedness to work itself out, to reap its own destruction. Second, he steps in more directly to stop it, to call ‘time’ on it, when it’s got out of hand. If we knew our business, we would

thank God for both of these, even though both can appear harsh. They need to be. If they were any less than harsh, the wickedness in question would merely pause, furrow its brow for a moment, and then carry on as before. What we see here, in the first four plagues, is a mixture of both types of ‘wrath’. We remind ourselves yet once more that this is deeply and powerfully symbolic language. This is obvious when it comes to angels ‘pouring bowls of wrath’ this way and that, but people often forget the lesson when they read the symbolic consequences.” (Wright, 142)

- **Negative views of wrath:** “People nowadays seem to have one of two basic perspectives about the ‘wrath’ of God. They either think of it as a punitive, vindictive, retribution on the part of God, or they dismiss it as a vestige of the cruel and darker perspectives of a less enlightened age. The first results in a God who is mean, authoritarian, even cruel; a God who is all too often incarnate in believers who are judgmental, critical, vindictive, punitive, retributive. The second results in a God who overlooks sin, who is not really concerned with the brokenness of people but who ‘blesses’ human bondages as ‘normal’ though ‘variant’ lifestyles. Such a God is also incarnate in believers for whom the primary virtue is ‘tolerance’ and whose values are but one set of relativities in a pluralistic world. It is readily obvious that such extremes have lost the creative tension of the paradox of reality. When the writers of Scripture spoke of the ‘wrath’ of God, they were searching for an image that expressed the fact that God’s nature is unalterably and eternally holy.” (Mulholland, 545-546)
- **The punishment fits the crime:** “People receive what they deserve. Those who accepted the mark of the beast receive marks of punishment on their bodies (16:2). Both the sea and fresh water turn to blood (v 3–4). As a result, those who shed blood are given blood to drink: blood for blood. It is what they deserve! says verse 6. In the same way, the earth turns on the destroyers of the earth. The rivers are polluted, and the sun is ‘allowed to scorch people with fire’ (16:8–9). ‘The time has come for judging the dead,’ says 11:18, and ‘for destroying those who destroy the earth’. God made humanity stewards of his creation. But, instead of husbanding the earth, humans have exploited it. One day humanity will reap the bitter harvest they have sown. The earth will turn on them as God’s judgment comes to its climax. People have been given every chance to repent, both through the disasters of history and the faithful witness of God’s people, but they consistently refuse (16:9, 11). So, the seven bowls confirm that God’s judgments are just.” (Chester, 114)
- **Hope:** “Between the third and fourth bowl we encounter a spontaneous hymn of praise celebrating God’s justice and bringing comfort to those who have suffered. In spite of the severe judgments, God is holy, eternal, just, and true. Those who have shed the blood of God’s holy people are now made to drink a judgment of blood. The principle of *lex talionis* (the law of retribution) appears throughout Revelation, but perhaps nowhere with more force and clarity than here. The altar, no doubt including the martyrs of 6:9–11, responds with an affirmation of God’s character and sovereignty.” (Duvall, 216)

- **Holy and True:** “In 6:10 the martyrs call God ‘holy and true.’ If God is true in the biblical sense of the word, God will act appropriately by executing the justice that the holiness of God requires. A permanent state of injustice would mean that God is neither true nor just, and in the narrative world of Scripture as a whole, that simply cannot be.” (Gorman, 157)
- **Summation:** “We would all much rather live in a world without wrath. We would all much rather imagine a God without wrath. In fact, a substantial part of mainstream Western Christianity has imagined just that—and has followed through on the consequences. H. Richard Niebuhr, one of America’s most famous twentieth-century theologians (and brother of the even more famous Reinhold Niebuhr), once memorably described the message of much ultra-liberal Christianity: ‘A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.’ Pretty damning, that. We might have preferred a ‘gospel’ like that, but it certainly isn’t the one we’ve got. And it certainly doesn’t match the world we’ve got. That’s the problem. In any family, school, business, country—in any organization or system of whatever sort—there will be deep problems. Things will go wrong. Human pride, greed, fear or suspicion will take over. Unless it is spotted, named and dealt with, it will only get worse. If it is allowed to flourish unchecked, it can even be hailed as a new way of living... This long, powerful sequence of thought tells us as clearly as anything could that what we are faced with is neither a capricious or ill-tempered divine being nor a careless, laissez-faire world ruler. We are faced with the God who made the world, and whose generous love is seen most clearly in the sacrifice of his own son, the lamb, the one who shares his very throne. If this God (to look no further than our own recent history) does not hate the wickedness of the communist and fascist systems that devastated so much of Europe, he is not a good or loving God. If he does not hate Apartheid, with its systematic dehumanization of half the human race, he is not a good God. And if he does not finally do something about these and similar systems, he is not a loving God. Because of the nature of his love, he will not always be stepping in and calling ‘time’ before the appointed moment. If he did, too many, who might yet repent and be rescued, would be caught in the middle. But he will let evil take its course and bring its own nemesis; and, at a moment which only he is in any position to judge, he will bring the necessary closure on the world’s wrongs. This he must do if he is, indeed, the father of Jesus the Messiah. This is what it means that the angels pour out the bowls of his wrath upon the earth, the sea, the rivers and the sun.” (Wright, 141-144)

Considerations for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Single underlined sentences are for discussion, while key points are double underlined.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.

4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- [5 Strategies for Reading Revelation](#) from the Bible Project (the first 17 minutes is GOLD!)
- [Heaven and Earth Theme](#) from the Bible Project
- [Other super helpful Revelation summaries](#) from the Bible Project
- [How Revelation mimics ancient Olympic games](#) by Marty Solomon

Bibliography (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

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