

God Pours Out the Bowls of His Judgment

Revelation 15:5–16:21

Studies in Revelation #23

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“Where is God in all of this?” We’ve heard the question. A hurricane wreaks havoc. A famine wipes out nations. A militia erases a village from the map. “Where is God in all of this?” In many ways this question from our culture evidences our unbelief. It evidences arrogance.

Here in the book of Revelation the resurrected Jesus Christ gives John visions so that he might comfort the church when it experiences suffering and so that he might warn the world when it experiences God’s temporal judgments. Now, some of us may not think there is such a thing as a temporal judgment of God under the New Covenant. There’s only a final judgment at the end of human history but now, God deals with the church only in blessing and he deals with the world only in common grace. Our Heidelberg Catechism, though, summarizes many Old and New Testament passages (Ex. 34:7; Ps. 5:4–6; Nah. 1:2; Rom. 1:18; Eph. 5:6; Heb. 9:27) when it asks in question 10 of Adam’s sin, “Will God permit such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished?” The answer in part is, “Certainly not. He is terribly angry about the sin we are born with as well as the sins we personally commit. As a just judge he punishes them *now* and in eternity.”

And Revelation has been showing us how God punishes the original and actual sins of our race. In chapter 6 we read about the seven seals that were removed from the scroll of God’s judgments. In chapters 8–9 we read about the

seven trumpets that announced his judgments. Now in chapters 15–16 read about the seven bowls that pour out his judgment upon the earth.

1. ***God is the Source of Judgment (15:5–16:1)***
2. ***God is Righteous in Judgment (16:2–16)***
3. ***God is Patient in Withholding Final Judgment (16:17–21)***

God is the Source of Judgment (15:5–16:1)

I want you to see first that this vision reveals that *God is the source of judgment*. We're too affected by our culture of niceness and political correctness that we spend our time defending God and deflecting criticism of him for being unjust. But this vision just proclaims "God, the judge of all" (Heb. 12:23).

Note what John sees. He sees **the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven...opened** (15:5). John here merges together the Old Testament temple, **the sanctuary**, with the tabernacle, **the tent of witness**. And we've already seen this but not in these words. Where are the souls of the martyred saints? "Under the altar" (6:9). That's tabernacle and temple language. And where do the white-clad crowds worship God in heaven? "They are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple" (7:15). So he sees a temple in heaven. And this is further impressed upon us in the image of verse 8: **and the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power**. The temple in which Isaiah stood on earth and which was filled with smoke and from where he saw the Lord high and lifted up with the train of his robe filling the temple causing the

door posts to shake was a replica of the true temple in heaven (Isa. 6). This is the same temple in which God sits upon his throne according to Revelation 4.

And it's from this temple where God dwells that we read comes the judgments sent to the earth: **and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues...And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever...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"** (15:6, 7; 16:1).

So what does this mean? Don't we so often speak of "bad things happening to good people?" Don't we speak about a chance occurrence, a freak act of "mother nature," of the tragedy of being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Revelation tells us that the things that happen here on earth that we describe in these ways are actually judgments from God himself. If you do not serve Jesus Christ you stand under this perfect Judge's judgment today!

God is Righteous in Judgment (16:2-16)

"I knew it! You Christians really do believe God is a celestial sadist, an immoral monster who kills the innocent." But God himself reveals in this vision that he *is righteous in judgment*. As John says elsewhere, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). God is not a judge who can be swayed by political

winds or by some selfish personal gain. He is the standard of perfection while we are the sinners. And so we read the acclamations of the angels and saints:

**“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!”** (16:5–6)

**“Yes, Lord God the Almighty,
true and just are your judgments!”** (16:7)

Notice how the seven bowls of God’s wrath, like the seven seals and seven trumpets before chronicle God’s judgments on this earth between the time of Jesus’ ascending to heaven and his returning to earth. And as we’ve already seen these bowls are described using Old Testament imagery from ancient plagues, such as on Egypt. So we see things like **painful sores** (16:2; Ex 9:9–11), **the sea becoming like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing dying** and **the rivers and the springs of water becoming blood** (16:3, 4; Ex. 7:17–21), **the sun...scorch[ing] people with fire** (16:8) like the ancient judgment of fire and brimstone from heaven, the **kingdom** of the beast, that is, worldly, anti-Christian government being **plunged into darkness** (16:10), and the drying up of **the great river Euphrates...to prepare the way for the kings from the east** (16:12), such as in the days of the Assyrians and Babylonians coming to judge Israel. Let me just quickly mention that the so-called “battle of Armageddon” like everything here is symbolic. Heresy! Well, you have **the kings from the east** (16:12) who are also **the kings of the whole world** (16:14). You have demons like frogs coming out of

mouths, including from a dragon (16:13, 14). And we're told the whole world's armies gather at **Armageddon** (16:16). There was a place called Megiddo, which was where the wicked attacked the righteous but God came to their aid in Judges 5:13. But here we're told the battle is at "Mount Meggido," for that's what **Armageddon** or Har Megiddo means. But there is no "Mount Megiddo." The Old Testament prophecies, in fact, say that the last battle will take place in the city of Jerusalem and at Mount Zion. Ezekiel 38–39, for example, says that this battle will take place at the mountains of Jerusalem. It's a symbol that brings together the story of Judges and the prophecies to say that God will come to his people's help at the end.

But how is all this just and righteous? God sends his judgment **upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image** (16:2), in other words, those who rejected him to serve Satan, which in a first century context meant serving Rome and Caesar. And the unbelievers' hardness of heart towards God is shown as they **cursed the name of God** (16:9) and **cursed the God of heaven** (16:11). And thus we read those disappointing refrains, which we know all too well with our unbelieving family and friends: **They did not repent and give him glory** (16:9); **they did not repent of their deeds** (16:11).

Note also how the pace of the judgments quickens from the seals to the trumpets to the bowls. Between the sixth and seventh seal there was an interlude. Between the sixth and seventh trumpet there was an interlude. But with the seven bowls there is no interlude, no respite. The theological point is that there will be

no more delay. If you are an unrepentant sinner today, you must repent because the time for God's final Judgment Day is near! Don't wait until tomorrow for there very well may not be a tomorrow!

God is Patient in Withholding Final Judgment (16:17–21)

And this leads to a third related point that will be quick: *God is patient in withholding final judgment.*

We read about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in verses 17–21 as we did at the end of the seals and trumpets. As verse 17 says, **“It is done!”** And verse 18 uses all the imagery that we've already seen to describe the coming of the Lord and final judgment: **And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake.** Verses 20–21 add that **every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found** and that **great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people.** And verse 19 describes the final judgment in Old Testament terms: **The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath.** Babylon is the same as the kings of the east earlier, whom we saw was the same as the kings of the whole world, all symbolizing this evil

world. This judgment echoes ancient prophecies that say Babylon would be “desolate forever” (Jer. 51:26, 62) and would “not rise again” (Jer. 51:64).

All of this is coming, my friend. But the fact that it is not here yet shows you the patience of God towards you. He was patient with the world in sending Jesus to live, die, and rise. And he’s patient towards you today. Don’t despise his patience. Repent of your sins against him. Believe in his Son, Jesus Christ, who takes away the sin of the world. Amen!