

The Book of Revelation

Session 9 - Atonement and Preparation (Chapters 15-16)

Book Overview

The Book of Revelation can be divided into five sections:

1. Introduction: Establishing Context and Conflict (Chapter 1-5)
2. Action: The Main Story (Chapter 6-11)
3. Action: The Main Story Retold - Focus on Satan's Schemes (Chapters 12-14)
4. Action: The Main Story Retold - Focus on Mankind's Sinfulness (Chapters 15-19)
5. Ending: Resolution (Chapter 20-22)

Chapters 15-16 begin the second retelling of the action, this time going into detail on the final act of the drama - the return of Jesus - and emphasising the sinfulness of humanity,

Chapter Overview

These two chapters can be divided into two sections:

1. The All-Consuming Holiness of God (Revelation 15)
2. God's Wrath Completed (Revelation 16)

These chapters begin another long vision (ch. 15-19) that focuses on the final act of this end-time drama, when Jesus will return and bring judgement to the world. These chapters help us understand why God's wrath is so severe.

A lot of the language and imagery in these chapters is the same as that in the Old Testament law concerning the tabernacle, sin, atonement etc. Exodus 29:42-46 is a vital passage in helping us understand that God's purpose from the beginning has been relationship. He desires to come and dwell with us, but sin first must be removed. This is why He gave the Israelites many laws about sacrifices and sin offerings - because sin keeps us separate from God.

Numbers 29:1-40 is another significant, yet greatly mysterious, passage. God instructs the Israelites concerning the Festival of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and the Festival of Tabernacles. The Festival of Trumpets was to be a time of stopping work and being still before God (Revelation 8:1). The Day of Atonement was to be a day where through sacrifice all of the nation's sin would be atoned for, restoring them to right relationship with God (Revelation 15:5-8). The Festival of Tabernacles was to be a time to remember how God led Israel through the wilderness, but pointing us towards a future time where God will come and dwell with us (Revelation 21:3-4, Zechariah 14:16-19). We can understand the events of the Book of Revelation as the great end-time fulfilment of these festivals, as God searches the hearts of mankind through the trumpet judgements (Revelation 8-9), removes sin from the earth through the bowls of wrath (Revelation 16) and comes to dwell with man (Revelation 21).

The All-Consuming Holiness of God (Revelation 15)

Verse 1:

"I saw in heaven another great and marvellous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues - last because with them God's wrath is completed" - John sees another 'sign', another vision to help him understand all that he's seen. This vision details the nature of God's final judgements on the earth, and the completion of God's purpose to remove sin from the earth through Jesus the Great High Priest (Revelation 1:12-18).

Verse 2:

"I saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and its image and over the number of its name" - John sees what is most likely the same glassy sea as in Revelation 4:6, but it is now glowing with the fire of God's anger and judgement. Standing beside this sea are those who had been victorious - their victory can never be taken away from them.

Verse 3:

"[They] sang the song of God's servant Moses and of the Lamb: 'Great and marvellous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations'" - They are singing the song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:4), celebrating God's final, great deliverance of His people. They are celebrating God's deeds - even His terrible judgements - because they are righteous and bringing forth justice. He is the King of the nations who is coming to rule and reign over the nations from Jerusalem.

Verse 4:

"Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy" - At the centre of this story is the holiness of God being revealed to sinful humanity (Ezekiel 38:17-23). *"All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed"* - Through His judgements God will bring forth praise. The response of the nations will be worship as Jesus is exalted through God's judgements. Jesus will sit on David's throne (2 Samuel 7:12-16, Isaiah 9:6-7) on Mount Zion (Psalm 2:6, Matthew 5:35) and all the nations will come to worship Him (Zechariah 14:16-19, Isaiah 2:1-5)

Verse 5:

"I saw in heaven the temple - that is, the tabernacle of the covenant law - and it was opened" - John highlights the temple in heaven when he's talking about Jesus' coming (Revelation 11:19, 14:15). These events are tied in with what His coming will literally look like. God has not changed - He is still faithful to the covenant He made with Israel, and still committed to revealing His holiness to Israel and to the nations (Ezekiel 37:28).

Verse 6:

"Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests" - These seven angels are dressed

like priests. They are preparing the earth for Jesus' imminent return by cleansing the land once and for all of sin. This is the Day of Atonement, when all the sin of the earth will be atoned for.

Verse 7:

"Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever" - These bowls are not filled with the prayers of God's people, but the wrath of God. There is something deeply personal about this. God is invested in this world and feels deeply about how we treat Him.

Verse 8:

"And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed" - This is a time of God's glory invading the earth. His presence is glorious and terrifying. Yet this time of judgement will bring forth a completion to God's purposes.

God's Wrath Completed (Revelation 16)

Verse 2:

"The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly, festering sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshipped its image" - The first bowl is poured out on the land. John emphasises that these plagues are reserved exclusively for those who have rejected God and partnered with Satan. Sores speak of judgement (Deuteronomy 28:27, Isaiah 3:17) but also of our own sickness (Isaiah 1:6). Humanity's sickness is being revealed through this bowl.

Verse 3:

"The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead person, and every living thing in the sea died" - The second bowl is poured out on the sea. Everything we look to for life is now just bringing death. But it is a death that we ourselves have brought about.

Verse 4-6:

"The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood" - The third bowl now turns all drinking water to blood.

"Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say: 'You are just in these judgements, O Holy One, you who are and who were; for they have shed the blood of your holy people and your prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve'" - Though to us these judgements may seem severe, in heaven's eyes they are just. The angel specifically highlights martyrdom as a reason why these judgements are so severe. God is giving back to the earth everything they deserve.

Verse 7:

“And I heard the altar respond: ‘Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgements’” - The altar in heaven - where the martyrs were in Revelation 6:9-11 - also agrees. These judgements are justified and cannot be argued against.

Verse 8-9:

“The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was allowed to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him” - Now it is the sun's turn to turn against humanity. Deuteronomy 30:19 - the heavens and earth are literally testifying against mankind as to their own sinfulness.

Verse 10-11:

“The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done” - The fifth bowl is poured out on the throne of the beast. Similar to Exodus 10:22-23. Whatever this darkness is, it is tormenting and brings pain and distress. But this judgement now lays bare the true state of these people's hearts - their only response is to curse God. He is righteous in His judgements yet they refuse to acknowledge their sin.

Verse 12:

“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” - In the context of the next few verses, the obvious interpretation of this verse is a reference to kings and leaders who will gather against Jerusalem. However, Isaiah 11:15-16 speaks of the Lord drying up the river Euphrates not to summon enemies but to gather His people back to Israel. Jesus also spoke of many coming from the east and the west to take their places at the feast (Matthew 8:11), and it was from the east that Magi came to worship. It is clear that God is preparing the way - but for who it is unclear.

Verse 13-14:

“Then I saw three impure spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. They are demonic spirits that perform signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty” - Satan's final throw of the dice is to gather the nations to Jerusalem to wage war against God's people and His city (Zechariah 14:1-9, Luke 21:20-28). This will be the work of Satan, the antichrist and the false prophet, who will deceive the world through their speech and through signs and wonders.

Verse 15:

“Look, I come like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and remains clothed, so as not to go naked and be shamefully exposed” - See Matthew 24:42-44 and 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. Jesus' coming will be like a thief to those who oppose Him. We are to remain alert and awake

so we will not be deceived or ashamed on the day He returns. On this day of judgement God will spare no one (Isaiah 47:3).

Verse 16:

“Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon” - The kings of the earth will gather at the plain of Megiddo in Israel, a place where motives and hearts are tested and tried (2 Chronicles 35:20-22).

Verse 17:

“The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying ‘it is done!’ - This is what Jesus cried out on the cross (John 19:30). This is the complete and final expression of Jesus’ victory on the cross. On the cross he broke the dominion of sin and gained full authority over sin and death (Revelation 1:18). Now Jesus is fully using this authority in gaining a final and permanent victory. This is not just about something finishing - something new has also begun.

Verse 18:

“Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since mankind has been on earth” - This final act brings about a final ‘sigh’ from creation. Its groaning is now complete. The labour pains (Matthew 24:8) have now brought forth new life.

Verse 19:

“The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath” - This great city is Babylon, as is clearly stated in the following chapters (Revelation 17:18, 18:10,16,18,19,21). This city is the subject of the final bowl of God’s wrath. His anger against this city has grown to its fullness.

Verse 20-21:

“Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. From the sky huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds, fell on people. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible” - Echoes of Revelation 6:12-14. Creation unravelling - a completely new beginning. Everything being completely devastated so Jesus can start again with a land that is clean and free of sin.

Summary

These chapters highlight four purposes of the bowls of wrath:

1. To cleanse the earth of all its sin (Revelation 15:6)
2. To prepare the way for Jesus' return (Revelation 15:4)
3. To reveal to the earth the holiness of God (Revelation 15:4)
4. To bring final judgement upon the beast and his kingdom (Revelation 16:10)

These chapters highlight seven ways the bowls of wrath will play out on the earth:

1. Poisoning the land and all that grows (Revelation 16:2)
2. Poisoning the sea and all that is in it (Revelation 16:3)
3. Poisoning the rivers and the earth's water supply (Revelation 16:4)
4. Poisoning the sun (Revelation 16:8)
5. Bringing darkness and torment upon the kingdom of Satan (Revelation 16:10)
6. Preparing the way for the final battle on the earth when Jesus will return (Revelation 16:16)
7. Bringing to a complete and final end the power of the city of Babylon (Revelation 16:19)