



Revelation 15-16 Study Guide

REVELATION 15

The book of Revelation shows patterns repeating over and over again. Each time heaven opens, seven significant events happen. First, John writes letters to seven churches. Then, he sees Jesus breaking seven seals. In chapter 8, seven angels warn of God's judgment. Chapter 12 shows seven visions of the battle between good and evil.

Now, in chapters 15 and 16, heaven opens again. Seven angels pour out seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth. One of the four creatures gives the angels the bowls, and God's voice speaks from the altar. Each angel, dressed like a priest, pours out a bowl showing God's anger. As they pour, the temple fills with smoke, a sign of God's power.

These bowls match the seven trumpets in chapter 8, showing events on earth, the sea, rivers, sun, evil, the river Euphrates, and the final judgment. The intensity grows with each cycle, revealing God's ultimate judgment and the fate of nations.

For believers, this shows God's control over nations, but for the ungodly, it's a fearful prospect. These visions remind us of the seriousness of God's judgment.

The Seven Angels with the Seven Bowls of Wrath (v. 1)

It may initially strike one as unusual that John introduces the seven bowl judgments in Revelation 15:1, only to shift subjects in 15:2-4, before returning again to the bowls in 15:5-8. However, this pattern mirrors a structure found elsewhere in Revelation. Again, in Revelation 8:1-2, for instance, the seven trumpets are first introduced, followed by a transitional passage in 8:3-5, after which the trumpets are described in detail (8:6).

The "sign" John witnesses in heaven in Revelation 15 is the third such sign he mentions, with the first two being the pregnant woman in Revelation 12:1. and the great red dragon in Revelation 12:3.

The seven "plagues" or bowl judgments are described as "the last" (eschatos; from which we derive our word "eschatology," the study of "last things"). Futurist interpreters of Revelation, who see the trumpets as chronologically following to the seals and the bowls as chronologically following to the trumpets, take this to mean that the bowl judgments are the concluding events in history, occurring just before the second coming of Jesus.

A different interpretation suggests that the bowls are "the last" in a formal series of visions. In other words, the vision of the bowl judgments is the final one in the series that began with the seals. Another view posits that the bowls are "last" because while the trumpets primarily warn unbelievers of impending wrath, the bowls mark the end of any opportunity for repentance.

It's significant that John states in Revelation 15:1a that in the bowls, "the wrath of God is finished." This indicates that the seven bowl judgments complete the portrayal of divine wrath initiated by the seven seal judgments. The full picture of God's wrath will have been depicted when the vision of the seven bowls concludes.

Another interpretive angle suggests translating Revelation 15:1a as "in them [the seven bowls] was filled up the wrath of God." This aligns with similar statements in Revelation 15:7 and 21:9, where bowls are depicted as filled with the "liquid" of divine judgment. Thus, the metaphorical meaning in Revelation 15:1 implies that the seven bowls portray God's wrath more intensely than previous woe visions.

However, it's incorrect to assume that the wrath of God is altogether finished with the bowl judgments. Revelation 20:10-15 describes God's wrath, and we know that unbelievers will continue to experience his wrath in hell.

The Song of Moses (vv. 2-4)

This prime paragraph beginning with verse 2 reflects back to the theme of final judgment portrayed in Revelation 14:14-20. It depicts the consummated defeat of the beast, which the victorious and vindicated saints now celebrate through song. They "conquered the beast" and Satan himself, as Revelation 12:11 tells us, "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony," and by loving Jesus and treasuring him more than their own earthly lives. They are described as holding harps and standing on "a sea of glass mingled with fire" (verse 2a).

Given the "new/second exodus" theme in this chapter, this "sea" likely alludes to the Red Sea through which the Israelites were delivered. Some interpret it as identical to the "sea of glass like crystal" (Revelation 4:6) before the heavenly throne. It may also symbolize cosmic evil and the chaotic powers of the dragon, over which the saints have emerged victorious.

The victorious saints now sing in praise of God for defeating the beast on their behalf. They sing "the song of Moses" and "the song of the Lamb." Are these two distinct songs, or one and the same? There's no certain answer.

Drawing from the background in Exodus, perhaps we understand Moses as the source or author of a song he and the Israelites sang about God, praising him for deliverance at the Red Sea during the exodus. Yet the Lamb of God has secured for his people an even greater exodus, one that delivers not merely from physical slavery in Egypt but from spiritual slavery to sin. The song is thus about the Lamb, who is the content, focus, and principal theme of their singing!

The lyrics that follow in verses 3-4 do not seem to be directly from the song of Moses in Exodus 15 but are drawn from various Old Testament texts. Nevertheless, the themes in Revelation 15:3-4 certainly derive from the song in Exodus 15. As for the lyrics here in verses 3-4:

All God's works are astounding. There is nothing boring or predictable about what God does. His deeds awe and astonish us because they surpass anything a human might accomplish. They are awe-inspiring. None of his deeds are artificial replicas of reality; they are reality itself! The psalmist proclaimed something similar: "Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. Full of splendor and majesty is His work, and His righteousness endures forever. He has caused His wondrous works to be remembered; the Lord is gracious and merciful" (Psalm 111:2-4).

While we may not immediately perceive the justice in all of God's actions, we can have confidence that he never transgresses moral standards. His judgments against an unbelieving world are both truthful and fair, ensuring that no one is treated unjustly. This sentiment is echoed in Revelation 16:7, where the altar proclaims, "Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!" (also see Rev. 19:2), particularly in reference to the final judgment upon those who oppose God and his kingdom (see 16:5-6).

I understand that much of what God does or allows may be perplexing to you. You question why he may strike down a righteous individual in their youth while permitting the wicked to live for a century. You ponder, as I do, why he tolerates one earthly tyrant who persecutes the church while bringing another to a humbling downfall. Yet, one day, we will comprehend all of God's actions and marvel, affirming that everything he has ever done was both righteous and true!

The saints particularly celebrate the punishment of God's (and their) adversaries, not only in terms of the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments they endure but also the eternal torment described in 14:9-20.

"O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name?" This echoes Jeremiah 10:7.

If the response to this question is "No one," implying that everyone will fear and glorify God's name, does it imply universalism? No. See Philippians 2:8-11. Even unbelievers will be compelled to acknowledge that God is to be feared and deserves all glory, honor, and praise.

"For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed" (see Psalm 86:8-10; 98:2).

Again, those among the nations who do not respond willingly in saving faith will be compelled divinely and justly to acknowledge this truth. Others interpret this text (v. 4) as a reference to the conversion of the nations as they witness the vindication of God's people and the righteousness of his ways.

Seven Golden Bowls (vv. 5-8)

Verses 5-8 serve as an introduction to the seven bowls of divine wrath outlined in chapter 16. The "sanctuary, which is the tent of witness," symbolizes the heavenly counterpart to the tabernacle where God's presence was manifested during Israel's journey in the wilderness. This "witness" refers to the Ten Commandments placed in the ark of the tabernacle and the "testimony of Jesus," fulfilling the Old Testament law (Exodus 16:34; 25:21; 31:18; 32:15; Revelation 12:17).

The concept of "seven plagues" originates from Leviticus 26, where God promises judgment "seven times" upon unfaithful Israel. Similarly, Revelation presents four sets of seven judgments (seals, trumpets, thunders, bowls).

The similarity between "the seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God" in 15:7 and the "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" in 5:8, suggests that the saints' prayers for vindication are being answered. God's judgments on an unbelieving world respond to the prayers of His people, as seen in Revelation 6:9-11.

Smoke in the temple, a recurring biblical theme, may symbolize God's glory and power manifested in judgment (Exodus 40:34-35; 2 Chronicles 5:13; Isaiah 6:1; 1 Kings 8:10-11).

No one can enter the heavenly sanctuary until the bowl judgments are completed. This may be because God's presence is currently revealed only in judgment and wrath, making him temporarily unapproachable. Some suggest it's too late for any go-between to intercede for mercy, while others suggest that the overwhelming manifestation of divine glory surpasses what humanity or the angelic community can bear (very much like Exodus 19:9-16 at Sinai).

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Praising God for His Wrath

It's easy to talk about God as love, grace, and mercy. Forgiveness and salvation are favorite biblical themes. But when judgment is mentioned, and the idea of God's wrath and vengeance arise, many balk. It seems criticizing God for kindness is unheard of, yet whenever His holiness and righteous anger are discussed, judgments arise.

So many emphasize God's love and grace, but without acknowledging divine wrath, these concepts lose their meaning.

And biblical passages such as Hebrews 10:26-31, Revelation 15-16, etc. make many people uncomfortable with their talk of judgment (Hebrews 10:27a), the fury of fire consuming sinful people (Hebrews 10:27b), punishment (Hebrews 10:29a), and vengeance (Hebrews 10:30).

Thus, the doctrine of divine wrath and anger is deemed by some as beneath God. They view it as "old school," considering it as nothing more than something crazy. In their view, divine wrath is an impersonal force, not a part of God's character like love or mercy.

However, this perspective misunderstands the Bible's portrayal of judgment and divine wrath. It's not an irrational outburst of anger or a celestial bad temper. Divine wrath is righteous antagonism towards all that is unholy—a reflection of God's character's revulsion to violations of his will (Romans 1:18). Interestingly, one may speak of divine wrath as a function of divine love. For God's wrath is his love for holiness, truth, and justice (Romans 3:25-26). His anger is rooted in his passionate love for purity, peace, and perfection, reacting angrily towards anything that defiles them.

Divine wrath is a facet of divine justice, ensuring each person receives what they deserve. It's not optional but a necessary aspect of God's righteousness. Jesus bore this wrath on behalf of believers, fulfilling divine justice (Romans 3:25-26).

Psalm 103:10 underscores God's mercy, not giving us what we deserve. This doesn't get rid of justice but highlights Jesus' sacrifice, removing our sins.

Rejecting substitutionary atonement as "cosmic child abuse," as some have taught, is blasphemous. Jesus willingly sacrificed himself out of love (John 10:17-18). His act allows believers to face divine wrath with confidence, knowing Jesus bore it for them.

In Revelation 14:17-20, believers find assurance because Jesus, as their substitute, endured God's wrath. This reveals the beauty of substitutionary atonement, where divine wrath is understood as an act of love, justice, and mercy.

5 Truths About God's Wrath We Must Hold Dear

#1 - If we don't believe we deserve consequences for our sins, then God's forgiveness loses its meaning. Forgiveness matters when we realize our wrongdoing has serious consequences. Grace, which is God's favor when we don't deserve it, only makes sense in light of judgment for our sins. Without the concept of judgment, grace loses its significance (Romans 6:23, Ephesians 2:8-9).

#2 - God, as told in the Bible, is holy and just. He will judge those who persistently reject him. Ignoring this aspect of God is both biblically inaccurate and unloving. Telling people that God will accept them regardless of their rejection of him is misleading and denies the reality of judgment (Hebrews 10:30-31, Romans 1:18).

#3 - God's wrath is not something to apologize for or ignore; it's a reflection of his righteousness and justice. God's anger towards sin is essential to his nature. If he didn't care about injustice, evil, or immorality, he wouldn't be worthy of worship (Romans 1:18, Revelation 19:15).

#4 - Despite his wrath, God offers grace through Jesus Christ. By sacrificing his Son, he provides a way for us to be forgiven and spared from his wrath. This grace doesn't dismiss the reality of judgment but offers a path to redemption for those who believe (John 3:16, Ephesians 1:7).

#5 - God is both loving and just. His wrath is not contradicted by his love; rather, it's a reflection of his holiness. We should be thankful for his wrath because it ensures that justice will be served. At the same time, we should celebrate his grace, which offers us forgiveness and redemption through Jesus Christ. (Psalm 145:17, Romans 5:8).

How do we praise God for his wrath?

#1 - Start with a high view of God (Psalm 24:1, Revelation 15:3): Recognize God's sovereignty over all creation. Understand that he is in control of everything, from the smallest detail to the grandest scheme.

#2 - Acknowledge God's holiness and righteousness (Revelation 15:4, Psalm 145:17): Understand that God is holy and righteous in all his ways. His wrath is not arbitrary or capricious but is an expression of his righteous judgment against sin.

#3 - Recognize the sinfulness of humanity (Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23): Understand that humanity has rebelled against God and fallen short of his glory. Recognize that our sinfulness deserves God's wrath and judgment.

#4 - Appreciate the magnitude of sin (Romans 5:8, Romans 6:23): Understand that the severity of sin's punishment reflects the holiness and position of the one sinned against. Recognize the infinite offense our sin is to an infinitely holy God.

#5 - Land on the hope of the gospel (John 3:16, 2 Corinthians 5:21): Remember the central message of our faith—the cross, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-8). At the cross, God expressed his wrath against sin while also providing salvation for sinners.

#6 - Walk in purity, witness with urgency, and worship with sincerity (Matthew 28:19-20, Philippians 2:9-11): Respond to God's mercy and grace with repentance and obedience. By his grace, live a life of purity, proclaim the gospel with urgency, and worship God with sincerity and joy.

In summary, to praise God for his wrath is to recognize the goodness and righteousness of his judgments, understand the depth of our sinfulness, and embrace the hope of salvation offered through Christ's sacrifice. It is to worship God with humility, gratitude, and awe, acknowledging his sovereignty, holiness, and love.

We can never go wrong with that!

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REVEALTION 16

In recent times, there's been a lot of talk about how the world might end. Some worry about global warming causing disasters, while others fear nuclear war or giant meteorites crashing into Earth. Movies even speculate about alien invasions leading to our demise.

All this speculation makes us think about those folks on the street corners with signs saying, "Repent! The end is near!" But there are also people who believe the world will keep going, evolving with new technology and changes.

What does the Bible say about it? Well, it doesn't give us a date, but it does tell us how things will end. The world won't exactly end – human history as we know it will. Instead, the Bible describes a new Earth where God's people will live forever in peace.

Revelation, especially chapters 21-22, talks about this new world. As for timing, Scripture is silent. But it does tell us that there will be increasing troubles like persecution and moral decay before Jesus returns to set things right (Matthew 24; 1 Tim. 4, etc.).

Though Christians may have different ideas about specifics, many agree that Revelation 16 describes the final judgments before Jesus returns. These judgments show God's justice and mark the end of human history as we know it. (Revelation 16:1-21)

The First Bowl (16:1-2)

The first bowl judgment is like the Egyptian plague of "boils breaking out with sores" (Exodus 9:9-11; summarized in Deuteronomy 28:27, 35). Are these sores literal or symbolic? They may represent physical afflictions or psychological torment, similar to the suffering described in the fifth trumpet (Revelation 9:4-6, 10), where individuals are psychologically and emotionally tormented like the sting of a scorpion. It's likely both. This description could also metaphorically cover the various infectious diseases that have plagued humanity throughout history. For instance, during the mid-14th century, over half of Europe's population perished from the Bubonic plague, also known as the Black Death.

Moreover, the reference to people bearing "the mark of the beast and worshiping its image" indicates that anyone who worships or serves anything other than the one true God of the Bible incurs God's wrath. This serves as a reminder of the consequences of turning away from the true God. (Revelation 16:1-21).

The Second Bowl (16:3)

This bowl judgment, akin to the second trumpet, recalls Exodus 7:17-21 and the plague that transformed the waters of the Nile River into blood. Unlike the trumpet judgment, which affected only one-third of the sea, this plague impacts all the waters. In any case, this likely signifies the various forms of pollution that have contaminated our oceans and seas.

The Third Bowl (16:4-7)

Once again, this bowl judgment is like the plague on the Nile River in Exodus 7:17. Similar to the third trumpet in 8:10-11, this judgment likely shows the suffering of those who rely on maritime trade.

In verse 5, John mentions "the angel in charge of the waters" (16:5), which might mean certain angels oversee elements of Earth. Alternatively, it could simply mean an angel appointed by God for

judgment on the prosperity linked to the waters. The exact punishment, "you have given them blood to drink," isn't clear, but it likely means suffering similar to what unbelievers inflict on believers.

It's notable that the angel of the waters remains unfazed. This is God's work, showing his holiness. His judgments are true and just.

Some say "it is what they deserve" in verse 6 refers to innocent saints and prophets. But it's more likely about the unbelieving bullies getting what they deserve.

Revelation 16:6 is clear: those who persecute Christians will face God's judgment, though it may not happen immediately. Verse 7 assures us that God's punishment for oppressors will be just.

The Fourth Bowl (16:8-9)

If we wonder about the kind of suffering this judgment brings, Revelation 7:16 might give us a clue. There, the righteous in heaven experience relief from their earthly hardships: "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat" (7:16; cf. Isaiah 49:10; Psalm 121:5-6). Perhaps, in this judgment, people endure economic hardship, leading to thirst and starvation, causing them to blaspheme God.

Despite the reluctance to accept that God is the source of such judgments and resulting suffering, verse 9 makes it clear that it is "God who had power over these plagues" (whether seal, trumpet, or bowl plagues). It shows how hardened human hearts in sin fail to repent even when they recognize that God is behind their misery (also coming in v. 11!).

The Fifth Bowl (16:10-11)

We learn from Exodus 10:21 that one of Moses' plagues against Egypt was complete darkness throughout the land for three days. This darkness likely rebuked the sun god Ra, whom Pharaoh was believed to incarnate. This fifth bowl judgment clearly parallels the plague in Exodus.

The "throne of the beast" likely symbolizes the center of the worldwide dominion of the great satanic system of idolatry. Plunged into "darkness," it probably represents spiritual darkness and intellectual confusion, causing chaos for those dependent on the world system and its idolatrous ways. In Scripture, darkness typically symbolizes judgment, ignorance, wickedness, and death.

The impact of darkness on the beast's sovereignty might involve internal strife, rebellion, or loss of political power. A symbolic interpretation of "darkness" is necessary, as literal darkness alone can't explain the intense "pain" leading to the gnawing of their tongues. This pain could encompass both emotional and physical anguish, particularly stemming from spiritual "darkness" and the realization of their separation from God.

The Sixth Bowl (16:12-16)

In the Bible, we often see God's extraordinary interventions to save his people, like when he parted the Red Sea for the Israelites to escape Pharaoh's armies (Exodus 14) and when he dried up the Jordan River for them to enter the promised land (Joshua 3). However, in Revelation, a different scenario unfolds: the drying up of the Euphrates River symbolizes a preparation for an attack against God's people (Revelation 16:12).

Looking back in history, we find that God used the diversion of the Euphrates to bring about the downfall of Babylon, allowing Cyrus to conquer the city (Isaiah 44:24-28; Jeremiah 50:33-38). This

historical event, prophesied in the Old Testament, serves as a precursor to the global-scale events described in Revelation.

The mention of "kings from the east" in Revelation represents a worldwide conspiracy against God's kingdom, rather than specifically referencing China. While some interpretations suggest celestial armies accompanying Christ (Revelation 19:14), this view isn't universally accepted.

Revelation also portrays demonic spirits—depicted as frogs—deceiving political leaders (Revelation 16:13-14), highlighting Satan's role in the global persecution of Christians.

The term "Har-Magedon" signifies a final cosmic battle between good and evil (Revelation 16:16), not tied to a specific location like Megiddo. It symbolizes Christ's ultimate victory over his enemies.

In summary, Revelation unveils a cosmic conflict where God ultimately triumphs over all opposition, showcasing his sovereignty and power.

The Seventh Bowl (16:17-21)

The vivid imagery of "lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake" in Revelation points to the final judgment at the end of the age (Revelation 8:5; 11:19). Whether these phenomena are literal or symbolic is irrelevant to John's point. He is describing the ultimate judgment against all opposition to God's kingdom and his Lamb, using symbolic language typical of Old Testament prophetic literature.

The "great city" mentioned in verse 19 is not historical Jerusalem or Rome but symbolizes "Babylon the great," representing all earthly powers that oppose Christ and His kingdom (Revelation 17:18; 18:10,16,18,19,21).

Further cosmic dissolution is described in verse 20, similar to passages in Revelation 6:14 and 20:11. The displacement of islands and mountains may be symbolic, representing the upheaval of evil forces and earthly kingdoms (Jeremiah 51:25-26; Zechariah 4:7), or simply the destabilization of the world in the presence of divine judgment (Judges 5:5; Psalms 18:7; Isaiah 5:25; Micah 1:4).

In verse 21, the Exodus plague of hail is revisited, but now affecting the whole earth and with hailstones weighing "one hundred pounds" (the weight of a talent). The question arises whether this hailstorm and its size should be interpreted literally, as in ancient Egypt, or symbolically, as in the preceding verses.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR REVELATION 15 AND 16:

1. What is the significance of heaven opening again in Revelation 15? How does this moment compare to previous instances of heaven opening in the book of Revelation?
2. In Revelation 15:1-4, we see a scene of worship before the pouring out of the seven bowls of God's wrath. Why is worship emphasized before the judgment is unleashed? What can we learn from this?
3. The seven angels receive the seven bowls filled with God's wrath in Revelation 15:5-8. What does the imagery of the angels wearing linen and golden sashes signify? How does it contrast with the bowls they carry?

4. Discuss the symbolic significance of the smoke filling the temple in Revelation 15:8. What does it represent, and why is it significant in this context?
5. In Revelation 16, the seven bowls of God's wrath are poured out upon the earth. What specific judgments are described in each bowl, and what do they signify?
6. How do the judgments poured out in Revelation 16 mirror or parallel the plagues of Egypt in the book of Exodus? What similarities and differences do you notice?
7. Revelation 16:15 contains a warning from Jesus: "Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed." What does this warning mean in the context of the events described in Revelation 16?
8. Reflect on the balance between God's justice and mercy depicted in Revelation 15 and 16. How does the pouring out of God's wrath coexist with His desire for repentance and salvation?
9. How do the events described in Revelation 15 and 16 challenge our understanding of God's character and His actions in the world? How do these chapters speak to our lives and faith today?
10. How should the imagery and message of Revelation 15 and 16 impact our daily lives and our relationship with God? What practical lessons can we draw from these chapters?