

# Revelation 15:1–16:21

## *Pouring Out the Seven Bowls*

### **A Lifelong Prayer**

---

I wonder if I might start this Bible talk with a personal reflection.

This is not my usual fare.

However, I thought that today it might be helpful.

So here goes.

I was brought up in a Christian home.

My parents were medical missionaries.

My grandparents on both sides were strong Christians involved in active ministry.

However, in my teen years I rejected the faith of my family.

Toward the end of my teens years, my life was spiralling downward into things that were sinful and self-destructive.

But God, in his rich mercy, confronted me in my sinfulness.

I was spectacularly converted.

Life changed overnight.

I felt intimately connected with God through his Son and because of his Son.

Then, a couple of years into my Christian life, I became aware that things were changing.

I had a growing sense that all might not be smooth sailing from here.

And so began a long and individual pleading with God over the issue.

Prayers over the issue have been almost daily.

I keep on praying them.

I pray them with the conviction and knowledge that one day this matter will be resolved.

I am confident of this.

After all, they are according to his will.

However, I have not yet experienced the answer to my prayer.

Maybe I won't in this life.

I don't know.

But I still pray a prayer about it most days in my life.

Friends, I wonder if you have this same experience?

Do you have something that you bring to God regularly in prayer?

A prayer that is not yet answered.

It might be a prayer for a loved one, a friend, yourself, or a promise from God, or a resolution of some problem, or whatever.

Well, if so, then you and I can join God's saints in Revelation 6.

Let me show you.

Please turn with me to Revelation 6, verse 9.

Perhaps you remember it.

It follows the throne room scene where we met God, the Almighty Creator and his awesome Lion/Lamb Son.

And from that throne room we watch the pouring out of the seven seal judgments.

Then, in verse 9, the fifth seal is opened.

And we looked into the heavenly throne room and saw the altar that was there.

But we also saw that under the altar were the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony that they had maintained.

They cried out in a loud voice that plaintive prayer...

*How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood.*

And do you remember God's response?

It is to give them a white robe of victory and to tell them to wait.

To wait until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

Friends, these are the saints in God's company.

Still waiting.

Still praying.

And still being told to wait for God to act to resolve their request.

Now, I start this way because I think that our passage for today, their prayers are finally answered.

But, if you don't keep your eyes peeled and your ears open, you won't hear it.

But when you do, you'll be awed at it.

And I think that you'll be encouraged to keep on praying that enduring prayer, even as I was when I discovered this little gem this week.

So, keep this in mind.

Watch for it.

But now, let's get down to work on our passage for today.

## **Remembering Where We Are**

---

But first, let's remember where we are.

Look at verse 1.

We are told that John sees **another sign** in heaven, great and amazing.

Now, do you remember our diagram?

Perhaps you'd like to refer to it again in you outline.

In Revelation 4, John has a second 'in the Spirit' experience.

During this experience, he saw three series of seven judgments.

Seven seals.

Which led to seven trumpets, with an interlude of seven thunders between the sixth and seventh trumpet.

Then, after the seventh trumpet had sounded, God's temple in heaven was opened.

Then a great sign appeared in heaven.

And we saw that there were three signs between this and John's next 'in the Spirit' experience in chapter 17.

On Wednesday night we heard of the first of the two signs.

The first was a pregnant woman (chapter 12, verse 1).

The second was a great red dragon (chapter 12, verse 3).

This dragon threatens to devour the male child of the woman

But the male child is snatched up to God.

The woman flees into the wilderness where she is cared for and protected for 1260 days.

This led opened up for us seven epic stories.

These climax in the coming of the Son of Man for judgment in chapter 14, verses 14–20.

There we heard of two harvests at the end of time.

Well, we now turn to the third sign.

This third sign is introduced to us in chapter 15, verse 1.

Let's turn to it now.

## **The Third Sign (Revelation 15:1–16:21)**

---

### **Introducing the Third Sign (15:1)**

First, we should remember the different words appended to each of the signs.

The sign of the woman is called a 'great sign'.

The sign of the great dragon is 'another sign'.

But the sign here is a 'great and marvellous sign'.

This great and marvellous sign will be matched by the great and marvellous deeds of the Lord Almighty in the song of verse 3.

Second, I want you to notice what is said in this first verse.

These seven angels are bearing 'the seven last plagues'.

It take it that this means these seven are the last of the groups of seven.

But there is more.

Look at the additional phrase at the end of verse 1.

John says that these seven last plagues are...

*last, because with them God's wrath is completed.*

I take it that this means that we are about to look at the last plagues of history.

They tell us that these plagues bring us to the completion of God's plan and the end of human history.

The wrath of God has come to completion with these plagues.

We are looking therefore at the end of time.

### **The Song of the Conquerors (15:2-4)**

In verse 2, we come to a long introduction to these seven last plagues.

The introduction will last until verse 8.

Within the introduction, there will be two sections.

Verses 2-4, which could be called 'The Song of the Conquerors'.

And verses 5-8, which I will call 'The Transfer of the Bowls'.

As we look over John's shoulders in verse 2 we see what looks like the sea of glass that we met back in chapter 4, verse 6.

This means that we are looking into the throne room again.

However, this time the sea is mingled with fire.

The imagery is that of judgment.

Perhaps that is picked up in the notion that standing beside the sea are those who have been victorious over the beast and its image and over the number of its name.

We've been following the this idea of being victorious ever since the letters to the churches.

And when we were before the sea in chapters 4 and 5, we got a glimpse of what it meant to be victorious.

In chapter 5, verse 5, we were told that the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has **triumphed or been victorious**.

He had done this by humble obedience to the point of death.

By faithful self-sacrifice.

And those who followed him were victorious when they depended on the Lamb and followed the Lamb wherever he went (Revelation 14:3-4).

Even as the beast appeared to be conquering them by killing them, they are actually conquering by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony (12:11, 17).

They did not take his mark (13:17; 14:9, 11).

They kept the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus (14:12).

These are those who stand in verse 2.

Victors like their Lord.

Those who will have access to the tree of life (2:7).

Those who will be delivered from the second death (2:11).

Those who receive the hidden manna (2:17)...

Will receive authority over the nations (2:26)...

Will be decked out with white garments and have their names in the book of life (3:5)...

Will be pillars in God's temple with the name of God written on them (3:12)...

Those who will sit with Christ on his throne (3:21).

These victors we see with harps given to them in verse 2.

They sing the song of God's servant Moses and of the Lamb.

It take it that this is the new Israel of God.

With Israel, they sing the song of God's servant Moses.

But they also sing the Song of the Lamb.

The Song echoes the Song of the Sea or the Song of Moses in Exodus 15.

It also has echoes of the Song of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 31 and 32 (especially 32:4-6).

The song is directed toward the Lord God Almighty.

It is a paean of praise to God for his greatness and for the awesomeness of his power and his just judgments.

## **The Transfer of the Bowls (15:5-8)**

### ***The Temple/Tabernacle of Covenant Law***

This song then bring us to the second part of the introduction to the bowls.

This runs from verses 5 to 8.

I want you to notice the transition that occurs here.

The transition is to the temple in verse 5.

Specifically, it is to the tabernacle of the covenant law.

This is the tabernacle of testimony.

It is where the Ark of the covenant contained the two tablets of the Decalogue.

It signifies that what is about to happen is God's execution in judgment of his unchangeable divine law.

God is about to call the world to account for its flagrant disobedience to his laws.

He is the source of whatever is about to happen.

And he is a just judge.

### ***Noticing Seven Angels, Bowls, and Plagues***

In verse 6 we meet the seven angels.

There are various things to notice about them and about what happens here.

#### *1. Robed angels*

First, they are robed in clean, bright or shining, linen.

They have golden sashes around their chests.

In other words, they look like priests (cf. Exodus 28, 39; Leviticus 16:4, 23, 32).

They also look as Jesus himself is portrayed in chapter 1, verse 13.

They are therefore acting not only as God's representatives.

They are acting as the representatives of Jesus.

2. *The source of the golden bowls*

Second, look at verse 7.

The source of the seven golden bowls is God himself.

One of his four living creatures gives the seven angels the seven bowls.

They are bowls filled with this wrath.

3. *The temple filled with smoke*

Third, look at verse 8.

The temple is filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power.

This is just as mount Sinai had been wrapped in smoke.

At this critical moment, it indicates the unapproachable glory of God.

No being, not even the heavenly beings, can stand in his awesome presence until the seven angels have finished their task.

The seven trumpet judgments had pointed toward this moment.

And now, the temple is closed for entry until these seven plagues of the seven angels are completed.

4. *Plagues*

But there are some other things to notice here.

Do you see the reference to plagues?

Let's make this the fourth thing to notice.

The word 'plagues' reminds us of Egypt

Indeed, as they unfold in the next chapter, we will be very specifically reminded of Egypt.

Well, the plagues in Egypt were designed to show God's power.

They were crafted in such a way as to reveal God's power in judgment on those who oppose him.

They were also designed to demonstrate to God's people his mercy and deliverance.

These plagues will do all the same things

And nothing else will take place until these seven plagues from the holy God take their course.

God's glory revealed in heaven will lead inexorably and irreversibly to the destruction of evil on earth.

And so we come to the pouring out of the bowls.

## **Pouring Out the Bowls (16:1-21)**

### ***An Overview***

Let's now take a look at the pouring out of the bowls.

Again, there are some things to notice.

#### *1. The focus of the bowls*

First, I want you to remember that we are now looking at the third of three signs.

The first sign was back in Revelation 12:1.

It was on the woman.

The second was in Revelation 12:3.

It was the great red dragon.

And the third was back in chapter 15, verse 1.

It is the appearance of the great and marvellous sign of seven angels with seven last plagues.

The point is that all three belong together.

The seven golden bowls of plagues are specifically tied to the woman and the dragon.

That is, they are specifically tied to the dragon, the beast, and the regime and city that flowed from them.

You can see that from the beginning.

The very first plague talks about the beast and those who worship his image.

These judgments show that he alone is worthy of worship, not the beast.

## 2. Hardened unbelievers

The next point arises out of the first.

Skim down through the seven plagues.

Notice verse 9.

There is a refusal to repent and glorify God.

Now notice verse 11.

It speaks of people not worshipping God.

No.

Instead they curse God.

Now, while this is somewhat present in the trumpets, it is more focussed here with the bowls.

The impression here is that we are now dealing with hardened, God resistant, unbelievers.

They are defiant and recalcitrant.

They are strongly opposed to God.

Linked with this is the absence of the saints.

This is a very focussed series of judgments.

### 3. Similarities with previous series

The next thing to notice is that there are distinct links with previous series of sevens.

But there are particular links with the preceding seven trumpets.

Just scan down the chapter again.

The first trumpet affected the land.

Well, look at verse 2.

So does the first bowl.

The second trumpet affected the sea and was linked with blood and death.

Well, take a look at verse 3.

The same with the second bowl.

The third trumpet affected rivers and springs of water.

So too with the third bowl in verse 4.

The fourth trumpet affected the sun.

Look at verse 8.

Same again.

And so we go through the rest.

Darkness and anguish torment with the fifth trumpet is matched by darkness and agony (verses 10 and 11).

The Euphrates River, war imagery and mouths in the fifth trumpet are matched in the sixth bowl.

Finally, loud voices in heaven plus lightning, thunder, an earthquake and hail in the seventh trumpet is matched in the seventh bowl by loud voices from the throne and lightning, thunder, earthquake and hail in verses 17ff.

#### 4. Differences

At the same time, there are some profound differences in the seven bowl plagues.

For example, the judgments are much more severe.

Also, in the trumpets, there were restrictions such as only one third of the an affected area being harmed.

Not so here.

There is only one restriction in the whole seven.

That occurs in verse 2.

That restriction is that the sores only affected those with the mark of the beast.

There is one final thing to say about the bowls and that is this.

All bowls except one are seen to affect the world of nature.

### **A Quick Run Through the Bowls**

With these general observations behind us, let's take a quick run through the seven bowls.

The first bowl is poured out in verse 2.

The focus is the earth and particularly those who bore the mark of the beast.

The second bowl is poured out in verse 3.

As with Egypt, water turns to blood.

Every living thing dies in the sea.

The third bowl is poured out in verse 4.

Fresh water is now affected.

They too become blood, just as in the plagues in Egypt.

Then, in verse 5, an angel speaks.

Look at the beginning and end of what he says.

The beginning and end stress the justice of God and his judgments.

*Just are you, O Holy One (verse 5).*

*Yes, Lord God the Almighty,*

*True and just are your judgments (verse 7).*

But notice also the irony in the middle.

Literally, verse 6 reads like this.

*For they have poured out the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink.*

Can you hear the irony?

First, those who poured out the **blood** of the saints are given **blood** to drink.

Second, those who **poured out** the blood of the saints are having **poured out** on them the seven full bowls of plagues.

No wonder the song begins and ends with the statement that God's judgments are just and true!

Now let's look at the fourth bowl.

It is poured out on the sun and is allowed by God to scorch people with fierce heat.

And the response of humans?

Well, they know the source.

And they curse the source, God.

Moreover, they did not repent.

Nor did they give him glory.

The fifth bowl is poured out on the throne of the beast.

I take it that this means his rule.

The result is like the plague in Egypt when Pharaoh took on God.

It is darkness.

The beast's kingdom is plunged into darkness.

People are overcome with anguish.

They curse the God of heaven for their pain and sores.

But they do not repent.

Then comes the sixth bowl.

In fulfilment of various Old Testament prophecies, the waters of the Euphrates dry up to prepare for the kings from the east.

This is accompanied by lots of activities of various mouths.

There is the mouth of the dragon.

The mouth of the beast.

The mouth of the false prophet.

Out of these mouths spew three unclean spirits like frogs.

These demonic spirits perform signs.

They are agents in assembling the kings of the world for battle on the great day of God the Almighty.

Notice verse 15.

Before announcing the last great battle, there is an exhortation to faithfulness and watchfulness.

The words of Jesus are recalled.

*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 to be exposed!*

These words of Jesus provide a brief interlude

This is the third of seven beatitudes in the book of Revelation.

It provides a reminder of similar encouragements and warnings from the letters to the churches.

It also provides a brief pause between the demonic spirits going out and the great battle gathering in verse 16.

Now that I've mentioned verse 16, let me tell you a bit about Armageddon.

The great problem is that there is no known place or Hebrew word 'Armageddon'.

So, it is possible that this is a cypher, something that readers are meant to work out.

And let me tell you what I think.

In Bible times there was a place called Megiddo.

It is the place where the main ancient roots from Egypt to Mesopotamia went.

It was a flat area between hills.

That meant it was a great place for chariots.

It also meant that it was a place you could meet your enemies and wage war for occupation of Palestine.

So, if we break up the word Armageddon in Hebrew, we get Har Meggido, which means 'the Mountain of Megiddo'.

My guess is that it means that place where all great battles are fought, that is, the plain of Megiddo, under the nearby hills.

So, it's a way of speaking about a last, great, climactic battle.

Then we reach verse 17 and the seventh bowl.

A loud voice comes from the temple, from the throne of God.

And it says...

*It is done.*

Now, I should say that we won't actually see it all done until chapter 21, verse 6.

Nevertheless, God announces the finish.

And he tells us what the finish will look like.

It will involve the great city.

Well, we'll find out about that on Wednesday.

The devastation is thorough and affects all, even the created order.

Yet again there is cursing of God but no apparent repentance.

Friends, I wonder if I could summarise what is going on here.

Do you remember the beginning of the signs narrative.

It was a woman and child about to be born.

This is a climactic and great event to be met with great joy.

It will result in the birth of Jesus who will be the Saviour of the world.

But it will also kick off an epic and final struggle that will end with spiritual war and upheaval of the earth.

Remember this.

This is the main message of these sections.

It is strong.

It is profound.

It's outcome is assured.

## **Noticing Some Things**

---

### **Golden Bowls and Responding Altars**

Having said this, I wonder if I might show you something special embedded in this story before I show you how I think this passage is designed to apply to us.

First, the special thing.

In order to do this, I need you to do some Bible flipping.

In your Bibles, flip back in Revelation to chapter 5, verse 8.

Remember the context, it is the throne room of God.

The focus is on the Lamb.

Look at what is said after the Lamb takes the scroll with seven seals.

*<sup>8</sup>And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb.*

*Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. [Revelation 5:8; NIV]*

Friends, what are the representatives of the people of God holding?

They are holding a harp.

But they are also holding golden bowls just like the angels are given in chapter 15.

But what is in the golden bowls?

It is incense, which is the prayers of saints.

Friends, I wonder if the seven bowls of the judgment of God is linked with the prayers of the people of God.

Is it in response to their pleading with him for an end to the maligning of God and the persecution of the people of God that he sends his judgment?

But now I want you to go to Revelation 6, verses 9–11.

Let's read it.

It is set in the midst of the seven seals.

It says...

<sup>9</sup>When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

<sup>10</sup>They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"

<sup>11</sup>Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been. [Revelation 6:9-11; NIV]

Friends, do you see where the voice to God comes from?

It comes from the saints **under the altar**.

And what does it ask for in verse 10?

It asks for judgment.

And what is the response?

Wait until the full number of brothers and sisters has come in who are slain for the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

Now, with these two set of verses behind us, let's go back to chapter 16.

And I want you to take a closer look at verse 7.

Look at it.

It says...

*And I heard the **altar** say...*

Now, friends, altars don't generally talk.

However, we know from chapter 5 that underneath the altar are the saints slain because of the word of God and their testimony to Jesus.

Could it be that it is their voices that echo from under the altar?

These are saints who have died.

These are saints who have prayed for God's judgment.

These are saints who, even after death, have been told to wait for the right time.

Could it be that finally their prayers are answered?

And now, finally, they are.

And so they praise God for this true and just judgments.

Friends, how spectacular is this?!

This is something that I can hold on to when my prayers founded upon God's revealed will are not answered.

I don't know the eternal timing of God.

I may not have my prayer answered in my time.

But God will answer it in his time.

Will you wait for him?

He will visit you in the right time.

He hears you.

And at the right time, he will answer.

## **Letters to the Seven Churches**

Friends, that is the first point of application that I want to make.

But there is another.

It comes from the fact that these chapters are bound together with chapters 12 to 14.

They are about three signs.

Well, as you read through these five chapters you will find constant links between these chapters and the letters to the seven churches.

Let me give you some examples.

There's the language of conquering or being victorious.

It's all the way through the letters to the churches.

And there it is in chapter 15, verse 2.

Then there are the references to Satan.

Satan is named seven times in Revelation.

Four of them are in the letters to the churches.

One is in chapter 12.

And two are in chapter 20.

Then there are the references to Jesus coming throughout the letters to the churches.

They are met by the striking reference in chapter 16, verse 15.

<sup>15</sup>*"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." [Revelation 16:15; NIV]*

Then references to false prophets in the letters.

And now, in chapter 16, verse 13, a reference to the false prophet.

Then there are the references in the letters and in the signs narratives about evil powers having power over the people of God.

For example, the Lord tells the church at Smyrna that the devil will put some in prison and they will suffer persecution for a set time.

Similar power is given in the signs narratives.

The book of life is mentioned in the letters to the churches.

It is mentioned in the signs narratives.

The Lord ruling the nations with an iron sceptre is mentioned in the letters to the churches.

It appears again in chapter 12, at the start of the signs narratives.

The book of life is mentioned in the letters to the churches.

So too is it mentioned in chapter 13 of the signs narratives.

Friends, why do you think there are these strong links?

What would it be that God is saying?

Well, here's my theory on it.

Life in the churches of God is like life in a world between the first and second coming of Jesus.

False Christs...

False religion...

False prophets...

Antipathy...

Rebellion...

The influence of the evil one...

These are constant threats to us.

And we as the people of God must make choices.

So, the question for us is the question for the churches as a whole.

They are pointed and potent.

Will you be among those who overcome by the blood of the Lamb, the word of God, the testimony of Jesus?

Will you be faithful to Jesus.

Will we together as the church of God be one which is faithful to Jesus and overcome by the blood of the Lamb, the word of God, and the testimony of Jesus?

Or will we follow the beast and his cohorts?

Well, as we see these options, keep the end in mind.

Notice where the dragon, the beast, his cohorts, and his followers end up.

And notice where the followers of Jesus end up.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit is saying through this book of Revelation to you and to the churches.

The one who is victorious...

The one who is faithful to the Lord Jesus.

That one...

Will not be hurt by the events of chapter 16.

