

Commentary on the Revelation

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 - A. The divine right to judge and reward, 4:1-5:14
 - B. The divine judgment of God’s enemies, 6:1-19:21
 - 1. The first cycle: the seal judgments, 6:1-8:5
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 - 3. A third interlude: Further Clarifications, 12:1-14:17
 - 4. The third cycle: the bowl judgments, 15:1-16:21
 - a. The bowl-judgments announced, v. 1

What is found here is an introduction to the final cycle of judgment detailed in 15:5-16:21. The word “last” may not indicate a chronological sequence, but a vision sequence; the judgment series or cycles are likely not one series after another, but repetition of judgment to emphasize the crushing of God’s enemies, the end of time, and the glorification of persecuted believers. This seems to make sense of the phrase, “after these things” (v. 5) which in Revelation indicates succession of visions, not necessarily lineal sequence.

Several things require reminding ourselves at this juncture: first, the several series of judgments end with a final consummation (the coming of Christ, the fullness of the kingdom, the glorification of believers in the presence of God): the seal judgments in 6:12-17, the trumpets in 11:15-19, the seven visions in 15:2-4, and the bowls in 16:17-21, 19:19-21). Second, these judgments are foreshadowed throughout the centuries, but brought to its

frightening apex in the final judgment at the end of time in the crushing/rewarding coming of Christ. This seems to be the view of John as he extracts from the Old Testament instances of the shadows anticipating final realities and making sense of the realities of his day and ours. Third, by the technique of multiple shadows and one final fulfillment that they prefigure, the Bible comes to possess a timelessness in comforting people in every generation because every generation experiences turmoil and persecution. Every generation is told in their current circumstance to look back to see God's deliverances from the shadows of the past (biblical deliverance or otherwise) and to look forward in hope for deliverance through the final judgment.

b. The praise of God for His judgment completed, 15:2-4

The phrase, "And I saw," is the seventh vision in the series that began in 12:1; it interrupts the bowl series and takes up the topic of the final judgment found in 14:14-20. Clearly the biblical background for John here and in the bowls is the Red Sea deliverance of God's ancient people (Exod. 15).

1) The presence of the victors, v. 2

The "sea of glass" in the heavenly vision is the counterpart of the post Red Sea experience. As the people of God were delivered from the Egyptian oppression and praised the Lord afterwards, the shadowed praise for deliverance is fulfilled in the final deliverance of God's people from the "beast." Here is a picture taken from heaven!

2) The praise of the victors, vv. 3-4

The New Covenant people of God praise Him for their deliverance by singing the Song of Moses. The actual words of the song come from a scattering of passages throughout the OT and used here to exalt in God's new and final exodus. The praise-content is four-fold: the names of God, the character of God, the actions of God,

and the response to God from all peoples. God and the Lamb are worshipped for the wonder of redemption accomplished and judgment rendered.

His names: Lord, God

His character: almighty, holy, sovereign

His actions: great, marvelous, righteous, true,
king

Response: worship

The phrase, “all the nations (v. 4),” is a figure of speech, called metonymy, in which a whole is used to indicate a part (peoples within the entity) to emphasize that many will come. Clearly, “all” the nations (Edom and Babylon, for example) will not return to worship God. Further the word translated “nations” can also mean “Gentiles,” a people group.

Also, note the three occurrences of “for” in v. 4, each stating a reason (the reason people to fear God is that it is His due; He is our superior [v. 4 a]. The reason we have come to know this is that He has revealed Himself to us [v. 4b]).

c. The third cycle: The Bowl judgments, 15:1, 5-8; 16:1-21

a) Introduction, vv. 5-8

The bowl judgments were cryptically introduced in v. 1 (see comments above), and are expanded in vv. 5-8. These are the last of the judgment cycles; there is a stress in these judgments on finality.

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What John saw in the vision of heaven he called the “tabernacle of testimony (v. 5)” as well as the temple, both symbolized the presence of God among His people. The “testimony” in the tabernacle, in the Holy of Holies, was the Ten Commandments. It is based on the law of God (the declaration of His righteous requirements) that just judgment will be poured out in the bowls.

From the inner temple, the very presence of God, seven angels bring seven plagues (this term is used three times in this section) indicating the divine origin and validation of the judgments (v. 6). The similarity of dress of the angel with that on the Son of Man (1:13) suggests that they have sanction to act on His behalf.

Golden bowls (v. 7) are mentioned in 5:8 where we are told that they are the prayers of the saints for the vindication of God through judgment. Their prayers are being answered!

b) The Bowl Judgments (Plagues), 16:1-21

What the previous chapter introduced, this chapter details. It is striking that the order of the judgments follows that of the trumpets (both follow the Egyptian plague-story being the biblical background of John's vision). The difference seems to be the mounting severity of the bowls as compared to the trumpets; the trumpets seemed to be cast as warnings but here they become tragic realities. As indicated, it seems best to see the judgment series (seals, trumpets, visions, and bowls) as repetition of the same thought but with progressively added detail.

Bowls	Egyptian Plagues
1. Sores (16:2)	Boils sores ((9:10)
2. Sea to blood (16:3)	Nile to blood (7:17-21)
3. Water to blood (16:4-7)	Waters to blood (7:17-21)
4. Burning Sun (16:8-9)	
5. Darkness (16:10-11)	Darkness (10:21-29)
6. Euphrates dried, death (16:12-15)	Sea parted, death (11:1-10, 12:29-31)
7. Hail, earthquakes (16:17-21)	Hail (9:18)

(1)The command to judge, v. 1

The “loud voice” from the temple instructing the angels is that of God or Christ, the latter given authority by God to open the book of judgment (Chapter 5) and the former mentioned in 15:5-8.

The phrase, “pour out the wrath of God,” is used in the OT of unbelievers (those who break the divine covenant) and those who persecute the faithful.

(As indicated in previous comments, the cyclical judgments have many shadow fulfillments through the centuries but final fulfillment in the catastrophe of a final judgment. People have always seen in Revelation comfort in their tribulations, but all that we have seen thus far are warnings and shadows; the worst is yet to come.)

(2) The first bowl (sores), v. 2

The point of the judgment is that God will afflict those who persecute His people. The Egyptian plague of boils (Exod. 9:9-11), which fell on unbelievers, is the background of this verse. The “sores,” may or may not be literal (this is a vision), but the point of suffering is literal. The image of pouring from a bowl, a phrase preceding each of the judgments is figurative of the resultant action; since it is not a literal “pouring” there are grounds for seeing the judgment in the same way (remember what kind of the literature of the Revelation).

(2) The second bowl (sea life), v. 3

This judgment has parallels with the second trumpet, the striking of the seas, shadowed by the Egyptian plague of turning the waters of the Nile into blood (Exod. 7:17-21). The difference between the trumpet and bowls judgments is that the latter is much more severe. The trumpet judgment is linked to Babylon suggestive of

economic and commercial collapse (8:8-9) as it does in chapter 18. The point is a maritime catastrophe that leads to famine and death.

(4) The third bowl (contamination), vv. 4-7

(a) The judgment executed, v. 4

The third bowl is parallel to the third trumpet with the difference being the greater severity of the bowl judgment. Again, the focus of the judgment is upon unbelievers (not the land of Goshen as in the later Egyptian plagues). The judgment of the springs of water is for persecuting the saints (v. 6).

(b) The praise forthcoming, vv. 5-7

In John's visionary recounting, the scene shifts to heaven and we learn of the reaction of the angels of heaven to the vindication of God in the punishment of the wicked.

It is interesting in v. 5 God is described as the one who was and is, but not one to come. In the plague God has come and heaven rejoices that God is acting to avenge the evil perpetrated upon his servants.

(5) The fourth bowl (fierce heat), vv. 8-9

(a) The fact, v. 8

It would seem reasonable that the reference to heat and burning is not literal, but figurative of severe judgment. The wrath of God in the OT is often figured as a burning. This judgment is quite similar to the sixth seal (6:12) and the fourth trumpet (8:12).

(b) The reaction, v. 9

As in the fourth trumpet, this bowl leads to greater hardness and a more determined effort to resist repentance; instead of fear there is cursing. In answer to the question, "Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify thy name?" we have it here, unbelievers.

(6) The fifth bowl (darkness), vv. 10-11

(a) The judgment, v. 10

The image of a throne is that of the source of power or the ability of the “beast” to act. This judgment is based on Exod. 10:21-29, as is the fourth trumpet (8:12): God judged the sun god of the Egyptian by extinguishing light and plunging them into darkness.

(b) The reaction, v. 11

As in the fourth bowl judgment, had the same effect. Unbelievers refuse to repent and further their acts of rebellious by cursing, little realizing that at the end of times wherein God will crush His enemies.

(7) The sixth bowl (the Euphrates), vv. 12-16a

(a) Stated, v. 12

The drying of the Euphrates has the imagery of the Red Sea experience that led to the crushing of the enemy of the ancient people of God and led to their redemption. This event will in effect be the same thing; the event leads to judgment of the pursuer of God’s people. The point of the imagery is that it marks the beginning of the final demise of the Babylonian harlot. In the Bible only God makes water into dry land (Egyptian exodus, entry across the Jordan into the Promised Land, Cyrus’ destruction of the city of Babylon).

(b) Elaborated, vv. 13-16

The great evil that is unleashed by the bowl is occasioned by inspired forces energized by the “satanic trinity, Satan (the dragon) primarily and his emissaries, the political and religious beasts (the latter is called “the false prophet” for the first time in the book).

The “unclean frogs (Lev 19:9-12)” are most likely demons (the Egyptian goddess Heqt, the

deity of life and resurrection, was depicted as a frog [here the image is that of deceptive action; they will inspire unbelievers to the last battle, to crush believers once and for all]).

“The kings of the East (v. 12) may be the same as “the kings of the whole earth (v. 14); the background is Ps 2:2. The “kings” are demonically motivated.

The phrase, “for the war of the great day of God (v. 14)”, is a description of the last great battle of all time, Armageddon, to prevent Christ’s coming. See also 19:19, 20:8. It is also the same as the events of 11:17. Gathering to exterminate believers, they will be destroyed.

Verse 15 is a parenthesis in which John quotes the words of Christ both to encourage and warn believers. This is the third of seven times that believers are addressed in the book calling them blessed (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). “I am coming like a thief” was earlier found in 3:3, there a warning to the church at Sardis. The thought of the image is unexpectedness or suddenness. The coming of Jesus is to consummate judgment upon unbelievers and the reward His children.

In the parenthesis the emphasis on remaining clothed as opposed to nakedness was also found previous in the message to the church at Laodicea (3:18). Nakedness is associated with judgment, but here it denotes shame occasioned by a life not conforming to Christ though one belongs to Him.

In v. 16 the thought of v. 14 is elaborated. Is

Har-Megaddon (Armageddon) to be read literally or is it symbolic? While there is no doubt of the truthfulness of what John is seeking to convey, the literal meaning of the word is perhaps a clue; it literally reads the “Mount or Mountain of Megiddo,” but 20:6 relates the final battle to the environs of Jerusalem and the dimension of the battlefield exceed the Jezreel Valley (see the comments above on 14:14-20). Further, says Mounce, “Har-Magedom would mean ‘the Mountain of Megiddo,’ but here a difficulty arises: there is no Mt. Megiddo (310).” It may be that John is using the “Mount of Megiddo” symbolically of what happened there but projecting it into a final future event. Barak and Deborah won a great victory over the Canaanites there for God’s people (Jud 5:19) and nearby on Mount Carmel the battle between Elijah and the prophets on Baal occurred (I Kings 18) with the demise of God’s enemies in the Kishon in the valley. Could it be that Megiddo is a symbol of the defeat of God’s opponents?

(8) The seventh bowl (final judgment), vv. 17-21

(a) The conclusion, v. 17

The announcement that “It is done” explains the purpose of the bowl judgment; it is to bring judgment to an end as stated in 15:1 (seven is the numeric of completion).

(b) The explanation, vv. 18-21a

The destruction detailed in these verses is nothing short of the demise of the created universe in symbolic terms that leads to the new heavens and the new earth detailed later in the book. It is the great last judgment of God.”

The object of the final wrath of God is “Babylon the great (Dan 4:30, Rev 14:8),” the symbolic center of all that stands arrayed in opposition to God and His children. Greater detail of this point will be found in chapter 17-18 where they are highlighted. There it refers to fallen human government deceived by the great deceiver and in strident opposition to God. Says Stott, “The *great city* It stands for civilized man, man in organized community, but man ordering his affairs apart from God. It symbolizes the pride of human achievement (201).”

In v. 21a the Egyptian plague of hail is duplicated, but this time it is not confined to one nation but symbolic of the destruction of the nations.

(c) The reaction, v. 21b

As in the three previous bowls, the consequence of judgment on unbelievers is the same; they remained entrenched and hostile to God.

Applications

1. We live in a culture where compassion for the unjust has more influence in our courts of law than the quest for justice. There is a tendency to be generous with the perpetrator of criminal injustice than care to preserve justice, freedom over right. The exacting of justice should be primary, not compassion for the lawless because it is through justice exacted that the innocent are protected. The assumption that kindness can accomplish what justice cannot is a lie in a fallen world. Without threat, lawlessness will abound. The saints in our passage worship God for vindicating His justice through judgment of the guilty. Do you see things the way heaven does? What difference in our world would we see if we did?
2. What a wonderful pattern is set in the praise of God for us. They adore and give glory to God for His names (Jehovah [the self-existent

one who condescends in compassionate love for His people], El Shaddai [the all-powerful one], Lord [Elohim, the creator and sustainer]); they worship God by exclaiming his character (holy, righteous, true), and His acts (judgment, mercy, grace). Can you see a pattern for your prayer, worship life here? Do you take the time to mediate and positively delight in the names, character, and actions of God? I think it would bring delight and charm into your inner soul.

3. When you think of the judgments of God, it makes you realize that one needs to be discerning when it comes to what one values. What people value and seek as the source of their security and happiness can be gone in a second. It was the missionary Elliott who remarked before his death in the jungles of South America, "It is no fool who will give up what he can lose to acquire what he cannot lose." Do you live your lives and define your values by things that are merely transitory or are you making choices with the real world to be found after the shadows of this world are past? What would such a life look like for you?
4. A reoccurring theme in our passage is that of blaspheming God. What does it mean to blaspheme God and are believers capable of it? The unbelievers in the chapter blame God for what has gone wrong in their lives instead of blaming their own hardheartedness. Things do go wrong in our lives, bad choices are made, unexpected and damaging consequences emerge, but how are we to view them as believers? Certainly, we are to take responsibility where that is justifiable but how often we blame God when things do not go as we perceived they should? Blaming God is tantamount to saying that the all-wise perfect-in-every-way God made a mistake. Have you found yourself blaming God for disappointment when in retrospect it actually was the blessing of God on your life?
5. God bring disappointments, even sorrows, into our lives to shape us, mold us, and protect us. We should look upon the events that happen in our lives as neither the product of our own abilities to affect them nor luck, meaning uncaused causes that are unexpected and random. They are the mysterious workings of God; it should lead us to humble submission and rest that God is working out our salvation for His own glory. You and I did not pick the day of our birth, the parents we have, the times and circumstance of our early years; these are in the hand of a loving, caring God. Do you rest in that fact when

disappointments come? Do you get easily depressed when things do not go as planned or do you turn to God with praise knowing that He work all things according to His pleasure which for us is the greatest of gifts and the ground of our assurance that God has our best interests in mind. You do not act like unbelievers and grumble to God, do you?

6. Just as surely that God is a God of mercy, He is a God of wrath. How is that to be explained? The answer is found in divine justice. God cannot forfeit His very character to redeem rebels, nor can He forfeit His justice to grant a reprieve to the guilty. God's just character demands that He be a punitive judge as long as sin exists in the world. Justice calls for its punishment and that punishment must be in conformity to the offense. Since all sin is against God and God is infinite, all sin is infinite. It requires an infinite manner of adjudication, a task that only God could accomplish; no one can accomplish it, but everyone will endure infinite justice in the form of wrath if it is not accomplished. Does this make you rejoice that God's justice for all your sins has been fully and forever requited through the death of Jesus Christ? Your forgiveness required His death; without His death for you, there would only be a just death required of you, but lacking infinite justice to address God's justice you would experience the justice of His wrath.
7. The announcement from the throne of God after the final judgment is, "It is done (16:17)." This should remind us of other times in the Bible when phrases like this are found. In II Sam 24 in the context of the judgment of David for numbering the people, the destructive consequences end when God from heaven calls out, "It is enough (24:16)." David bought the land in his city where the announcement was heard and his son would build there, on Mount Moriah, a great temple suggestive of God's presence among His people. Judgment ended in God's mercy. From the cross on the same mountain range, to the north of the altar of sacrifice Christ died for us. In his death he uttered these words, "It is finished (John 19:30)." Because of what Jesus did on the cross, prefigured in the experience of David, at the end of times judgment will end, sin will be judged and eradicated from the people of God who will enjoy the unbroken presence of God forever. What does "It is done" mean in your life? How has it changed your life? How would you like it to change you even more?

