

“The Seven Bowls of the Wrath of God” (An Exposition of Revelation 16:1-21)¹

Introduction

You may wonder why the Bible has so much to say about the just wrath of God. And the book of Revelation certainly has its fair share to tell us about that subject, doesn't it?

That must be *for a good reason*. We must *need* to hear of God's wrath. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 the Apostle Paul tells us that **“All Scripture is breathed out by God”** for the purpose **“that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”** Chapters like this one are given for that same purpose – to equip us as believers to live the Christian life. So we must not neglect them.

In the previous chapter (15) John saw *a great and amazing sign in heaven* – that of seven angels having the seven plagues of God's wrath, and these plagues were contained in seven golden bowls. John tells us that with these seven plagues **“the wrath of God is finished”** (v.1).

As we have seen a number of times throughout our study of the book of Revelation, the number seven is a number that indicates completeness. So when we read of **“seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God”** (15:7), we are to understand that this speaks of the *completeness* or *fullness* of God's wrath finally being poured out.

Here in chapter 16 John recounts the vision of those seven angels pouring out those seven bowls of the wrath of God upon the wicked. One-by-one each bowl is poured out, and John's description necessarily brings to mind the ten miraculous plagues that God inflicted upon Pharaoh and Egypt.

And these plagues here in chapter 16 seem to follow the same basic order as the seven trumpets of God's wrath that we saw back in chapters 8-11.

Notice that in the midst of these seven bowls of wrath being poured out, something that we might find as unexpected happens – God's holy wrath is *praised* by one of the angels. In v.5-6 that angel speaks of the just nature or righteousness of God's judgment and wrath upon the wicked.

Likewise in v.7 the altar (!) speaks, saying, **“Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!”** In some ways you could say that this praise of God's just wrath is really the *center* and *focal point* of the chapter.

Many of us often tend to get caught up in trying to discern the significance of all of the details of this vision. And while we should not neglect to seek to understand those details, we can sometime lose the forest for the sake of the trees when it comes to these things.

And so this morning, we are *not* going to unpack all of the details of this vision or answer every question that you may have about what Armageddon is. Instead we are going to focus on a few of the main things that are emphasized for us in this chapter.

God's wrath is *certain*. It will one day finally be poured out in its *fullness* upon the wicked. And it will be a cause for *praise and rejoicing* for God's redeemed people. And God's wrath is *just and holy*.

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

This vision that John writes of in this chapter paints a picture for us of at least three (3) things: **1) The Fullness and Finality of God's Wrath**, **2) the Praise of God's Wrath**, and **3) the Just Nature of God's Wrath**.

The Fullness and Finality of God's Wrath

The *first* thing we should take note of here in our text is the *fullness and finality* of God's wrath. This is pictured for us in that there are *seven* (7) bowls of God's wrath. As we have seen, seven is the number of *completeness*. In v.1 John writes,

“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.””

The fact that John spends so much time going through the pouring out of each of those seven bowls in order throughout the rest of this chapter serves to emphasize that finality as well.

Not only that, but notice that the bowls of God's wrath are poured out onto *every part of the earth* – on **“the earth”** (v.2), **“the sea”** (v.3), **“the rivers and springs of water”** (v.4), **“the sun”** (v.8), **“the throne of the beast”** (v.10), **“the great river Euphrates”** (v.12), and even **“the air”** (v.17).

Nothing is left untouched. God's wrath will one day be poured out in its fullness. All of the outpourings of God's wrath throughout history, have been and are *fore-shadowings* of the wrath to come.

Whether it be the flood of Noah's day, the fire and brimstone that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, the 10 plagues upon Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea during the Exodus, or any other example in the Scriptures or in world history, *all of these things* are reminders of the certainty of God's wrath.

As 2 Peter 3:3–7 tells us,

“knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.”

Peter tells us that scoffers **“deliberately overlook”** the flood of Noah's day. They refuse to heed the message of the flood – that God will indeed judge the wicked, and that He will do it on a worldwide scale.

Perhaps that is the *real* reason so many skeptics and scoffers in our day mock and cast doubt on the very notion of the flood. They can't bear the truth that it teaches all of humanity – God *will* judge.

Finally, in v.17 John writes, **“The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, “It is done!””** It will be **“done”** or *finished*.

The Praise of God's Wrath

The *second* thing we should notice in this chapter is *the praise of God's wrath*. In v.5-7 John writes,

“And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say,

**“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!”

And I heard the altar saying,

**“Yes, Lord God the Almighty,
true and just are your judgments!”**

God's just judgment and wrath upon the wicked and unrepentant, His wrath upon all of the evil in this world, is *a cause for praise* among God's redeemed people.

It is certainly a fearful thing, but this chapter (just like the rest of the book of Revelation) is *not* given in order to *frighten* Christians.

These visions in Revelation are given to *encourage* us. It is meant to *give us hope*. It is meant to give us *comfort* in time of suffering and affliction.

And so, once again, if you are a believer in Christ, and so stand *forgiven and accepted* as righteous in God's sight because of the righteousness of Christ accounted to you by faith, if you are adopted in Christ as a child of God – this book is *not* meant to frighten you.

If you are a *believer* and are reading Revelation in such a way, or being taught it in such a way, as to be *frightened* by it (rather than *comforted* by it), you are *reading* it wrong or *being taught* it wrong!

God's wrath and just judgment are to be *praised* by us. They *will* one day be praised by us!

God will be glorified in His *wrath* upon the wicked just as much as He is glorified in His amazing *grace* that He lavishes upon us in Christ.

God's holiness and wrath are *not* at odds with His love and grace. They are not contradictory things.

God would *not* be *good* or *loving* if He did not hate evil and sin. Heaven would not be heaven if God did not make all things right on that last day.

A great part of the misery of living in this world of sin in the *injustice* that we see all around us. The shedding of “**the blood of saints and prophets**” (v.6) must be made right. You could say that this is part of how Romans 8:18–19 will be fulfilled:

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.”

The Just Nature of God's Wrath

Last but not least, the vision in this chapter of Revelation teach us of *the just nature of God's wrath*. Look again at the words of the angel in v.5-6:

**“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!”**

God's is **“just”** (or *righteous*) in His judgment and wrath. He is the **“Holy One”** (v.5). And it is precisely *because* He brings these judgments that He is holy and just.

In other words, *God would not be holy and just* if He did not judge the wicked!

And why is that? The angel says, **“For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink.”** Not only will God make the punishment fit the crime, so to speak, but even more importantly, His wrath is poured out because He loves His people.

The wicked harmed the apple of God's eye, having **“shed the blood of saints and prophets.”** And God will make that right. As the angels says in v.6, **“It is what they deserve!”**

The Judge of all the earth will do right. His judgments are **“true and just”** (v.7).

Not only that, but notice that *three* (3) times in this chapter we are told that even as God's wrath is being poured out, the wicked show their true colors – *they stubbornly refuse to repent!*

“They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. *They did not repent and give him glory.*” (v.9)

“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 anguish and *cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds.*” (v.10-11)

“And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people; *and they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe.*” (v.21)

Just as Pharaoh's heart was hardened after each plague, so it will be on that last day. The wicked do not heed God's judgments and wrath, but go further into sin and unbelief.

They refuse to repent of their wickedness. They refuse to give God glory. They curse His holy name.

And so God's wrath and judgment upon them are holy and just. God's just judgment and wrath show Him to be holy and just and true.

And so He is to be *praised* for it! He is to be *glorified* for it. May we learn to praise God both for His glorious grace, as well as for His just judgment and wrath. May we learn even to be comforted by it as believers. And if you are yet an unbeliever, may it lead you to repentance and faith. - Amen