

The Conquering Christ

Message 9

Seven Bowls

Revelation 14:1-16:21

The End

Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished. (Revelation 15:1)

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!"¹⁸ And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake.¹⁹ The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath. (Revelation 16:17-19)

It is done. With the close of chapter 16 we have the end. The seventh bowl contained the last drop of God's wrath against sin. There is more to be seen, however. The rest of the book contains visions which are essential to understanding the meaning of the end. But the last bowl brings us to the end of the story John wishes to tell us.

Let us get our bearings. Revelation is built around three seven-fold events. In between are explanations of those events. The seven seals of chapters 6-8 open the scroll which contains God's plan for completing the salvation of His people. When the Lamb opened those seals he put in motion the events which lead up to the end. The seven trumpets of chapters 8-11 are the warnings proclaimed by the apostles and prophets in the first century. They urged men to repent and believe the gospel before the end. Tonight we will see the seven bowls filled with God's wrath. As these are poured out on the earth, God destroys His enemies and finishes the plan contained in the scroll.

The last two weeks we have been studying chapters 12-13 which are a survey of the history of the time when these things take place. But it is an unusual history. It is not an account of the actions of great men and nations. That is what we on earth see. This history is the view from the throne room. It is God's perspective. We started with the birth of Jesus and continued to the time when John was writing – the middle of the first century. We have focused on the main characters. First there was the glorious woman, wearing the sun and the stars, and standing on the moon. This is the people of God – Israel before Christ came, and now the church. The child she delivered was Jesus. Jesus was attacked by a great red dragon, who is identified for us as Satan. Satan tried to kill Jesus when he was a baby, but God delivered Him. Satan continued his attacks until Jesus was taken to heaven after He rose from the dead. When Jesus arrived in heaven, a war broke out – Satan and his demons against Michael and the angels. Michael won, and Satan was cast out of heaven to the earth.

Satan was enraged, and he vented his hatred against the followers of Jesus. He tried to drown them in a false gospel of salvation by Jesus plus law, but the apostles defeated this trick. More furious, Satan called forth two beasts to assist him in destroying the church. The sea beast was Rome, and she attempted to force Christians to worship the emperor or face death. The land beast was the Jewish religious establishment. Satan tried to use the Jews to lure Christians into reverting back to temple worship. Last week we saw that Satan still uses these two strategies of intimidation and confusion to attack the church. The way to conquer state power is to trust Jesus and fear Him more than death. The way to conquer confused religion is to know Jesus and the Bible very very well.

This was the situation in the middle of the first century. The witness of the Christians had spread the church all over the Roman Empire. The apostle Paul had led the way in fighting Satan's effort to mix the law into the gospel message, so the church was doctrinally pure and prospering. At the same time the pressure from Rome and the Jews was increasing. For a while after Jesus ascended to heaven Rome did not bother the church. She considered Christians to be a sect of the Jews, and Judaism was a protected religion in the empire. Two trends brought this protected status to an end. First, the church grew rapidly and began incorporating gentiles. There were even believers in the palace at Rome! This and the prolonged struggle with the Jews made it increasingly clear that Christians represented an entirely different religion than the Jews. Second, the steady rise of emperor worship put increasing pressure on Christians to burn incense to the emperor. Rome tolerated all religions – as long as their adherents worshiped the emperor. Refusal to worship the emperor was considered a political issue – treason, to be exact. Such refusal could get you executed. This was not a problem for most people. There was nothing in other religions which demanded exclusive worship. But Jesus *does* demand exclusive worship. So as the church became distinct from the Jews and as the demand for emperor worship grew, Christians came under increasing threat from both Rome and the Jews.

The Harvest

Chapter 14 opens with 144,000 people standing on Mount Zion. These are the same people introduced to us in chapter seven. They are the servants of God who were sealed on their foreheads. Chapter seven tells us that 12,000 were sealed from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. We learned that they came out of the great tribulation and stand before God singing His praises. This vision of the 144,000 sealed servants came just before the seventh seal was opened. From all this we concluded that these people play a role sometime just before the event of the last seal – in other words, before the end.

Now as we approach the end we, return to this vision of the 144,000 servants of God. Verse three says they have been redeemed from the earth. They are virgins. This symbolizes that they have not committed spiritual adultery by betraying their Lord. They follow the Lamb wherever He goes. They are the firstfruits for God.

Who are these people, and what is their significance? And what is the meaning of 144,000? This number comes from the sum of the count of every tribe of Israel. Twelve thousand from each of twelve tribes gives us 144,000 people. Twelve thousand is a product of the number symbol for Israel – twelve – and the number symbol for a huge quantity – 1,000. Basically 144,000 represents a huge number of God's people. But it is interesting that the tribal enumeration follows the same pattern as the Old Testament enumerations when the people were mustered for war. These 144,000 are an army. This is why verse four says they have not been defiled with women. Women do not defile anyone, but if he were to fight in God's army, an Old Covenant Israelite must be celibate during the campaign. (Deuteronomy 23:9-10; 1 Samuel 21:5). The 144,000 is the army God has raised to fight the dragon. The note that they are firstfruits should alert us to their fate.

The story of God's army is interrupted by three announcements. Each announcement comes by an angel flying through the air. The first angel announces the eternal gospel. But what is the content of this gospel? "The hour of judgement has come!" How is this the gospel? Isn't the gospel the message of salvation through Jesus Christ? Yes, of course it is. But Jesus also announced judgment. People usually overlook this part of Jesus' ministry. Jesus spent much time warning people about judgment and hell to follow. Often when we tell people about Jesus, we dwell on the pleasant parts of His message and neglect the warnings. Perhaps you came to Christ looking for a more abundant life, not realizing that the gospel condemns you to hell if you refuse Jesus. The gospel is not only the news that Jesus saves, but also that Jesus rules. In fact this is a more faithful statement of the gospel. Mark summarizes Jesus' message in the

first chapter of his gospel, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:15) You see here the focal point of Jesus’ message was the coming of the Kingdom of God. By implication, Jesus is primarily the King. As King, Jesus both saves and judges. The word “gospel” means good news. The gospel is good news to those who believe, but bad news to those who do not. The good news comes in two parts. First, if you believe the gospel, you will be saved from judgment. Second, you will be saved from those who attack you. The announcement that judgment has come is good news to those who are being persecuted by the two beasts.

The second angel announces the fall of Babylon, which we will explore in depth next week. The third angel announces woe on all those who worship the beast and its image. They will be tormented with fire “and the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night...” (Revelation 14:11) By contrast the saints who endure will be blessed. Verse 13 says, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.”

The last two paragraphs in chapter 14 each describe a harvest. First there is a grain harvest, then a grape harvest. Harvest imagery is common in the Bible, and this particular scene is eerily reminiscent of Joel 3:13. Commentators debate whether the two harvests represent a gathering of the same group or two different groups. The grain harvest fits well with Jesus’ parables in which His followers are likened to grain. The grape harvest initially seems different. Verse 19 tells us that the harvest was thrown “into the great winepress of the wrath of God.” Clearly believers would not be destroyed in God’s wrath, so perhaps this is a harvest of unbelievers. However the phrase “the wrath of God” can have two possible references here. It can refer to God’s anger against the grapes. Or it can refer to His anger at those who crushed the grapes. Either is grammatically possible. But there are other clues. The winepress was trampled outside the city – a clear reference to Jesus’ own crucifixion outside the city. In the book of Hebrews believers are urged to suffer with Jesus “outside the camp.” (Hebrews 13:13) And in chapter 17 Babylon drinks the blood of the saints, which brings God’s wrath upon her. The best explanation is that the grain harvest and the grape harvest both represent the death of the 144,000 faithful servants. Their blood will arouse God’s anger and bring about the destruction of their murderers.

Chapter 14 is about the first century martyr army of Jesus. These are believers chosen by God to die for their faith. They go into battle trusting in the blood of the lamb, bearing witness to Jesus, and fearless of death. Armed with these invincible weapons, they conquer the beast. But notice that they die in the process. And far from a tragedy, their death is a great victory – for through death they receive rest. They die, not because God loves them less or cares for them less than other people. They die because they are special to God. When God went out into the field to harvest the ripe grain, these are the ones He chose. When God sought grapes to make the best wine, these are the ones He picked. Their death was a sign of God’s special care for them. “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.”

As we begin chapter 15, the martyr army enters heaven singing a victory song. There they are met by a majestic procession of seven angels carrying seven bowls. Now we are overwhelmed by images from the Exodus. The martyrs stand beside a red sea singing the song of Moses, the angels emerge from the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle in heaven, while the smoke of God’s presence fills the whole sanctuary. Now, prepare for the end!

The Bowls of Wrath

When the seventh bowl was poured out, a loud voice came from the throne in the temple saying, “It is done!” The events described by the bowls of God’s wrath bring to an end the plan that was written on God’s scroll. This is the scroll that Jesus opened in chapters 6-8. If you compare the bowls and the trumpets, it is easy to see a close parallel. What the trumpets announced has now come to pass. The disasters of the trumpets were only on part of the earth, but the bowls destroy everything. The warnings are over. This is the

real thing. This is the end.

The first bowl is God's attack on the corrupt Jews – the people of the land. The mark of the beast turned into painful sores. Again, notice the close parallel with the plagues of Egypt as we go through these calamities. Remember chapter 11:8 showed us that God is attacking spiritual Egypt. The second bowl is God's attack on the gentiles. Those who spilled the blood of His saints will now drink their blood. The third bowl is God's attack on the temple. The corrupt Jewish leaders will now drink the blood of the saints they killed. The fourth bowl is God's attack on the rulers. God enlarged the power of the rulers so that they could abuse their people. The fifth bowl is God's attack on the emperor, which threw the whole empire into chaos. The formerly peaceful and prosperous empire now became dangerous and deadly. The sixth bowl is God's attack on the whole world. He used the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet (the land beast) to deceive the whole world into waging war on the Lamb. Many Christians have perished already. Jew and gentile are now united to destroy any remnants of the Lamb. The seventh bowl is God's victory over the universal army. It is total victory. Babylon, the great instigator, is destroyed, and with her falls the cities of the world. It is total destruction – terror so massive that people curse God.

Does Revelation make sense now? Do not worry. The last five chapters will clear up any lingering confusion! But let us take a few minutes to fill out the historical context. Soon after Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to the church, the Jews began persecuting God's people. First they arrested and threatened Peter and John. Then they imprisoned and whipped the apostles. Then they killed Stephen. From then on the Jews maintained a campaign of persecution and murder against believers in Jesus. The book of Acts tells us how Saul was authorized to go all the way to Damascus to hunt down believers and haul them back to Jerusalem to be tried. All the way to the end the Jews persecuted and killed the believers. Meanwhile the Romans began to join the fray. Christians were having a harder time with Rome as time went on, but when Nero came to the throne persecution moved into high gear. Among his atrocities Nero accused Christians of setting the fire that destroyed Rome in A.D. 64. He used this as a pretext to persecute believers and deflect criticism from himself. Nero was a sadist who entertained his dinner guests with torches made of the bodies of Christians. By the mid A.D. 60s Christians were dying all over the empire. This is the harvest. The cruelty of Rome and Jerusalem was simultaneously the loving care of Jesus as He welcomed home his conquering heroes.

Then in A.D. 68 Nero committed suicide. Without a clear successor, the empire was plunged into chaos. Armies fought back and forth as competing generals battled to gain the throne. A.D. 68-69 is known as "the year of three emperors" as Galba, Otho, and Vitellius struggled for supremacy. No one alive had ever known anything but peace in the empire. Now the empire appeared to be collapsing. Surely this was the end of the world. But in A.D. 69 the empire miraculously came back to life. Vespasian came to the throne and ruled for ten years. He restored peace, and solidified the emperor's grip on power. This is the head wound that was healed, described in chapter 13:3.

Meanwhile sometime in A.D. 62-64 the Jews finished the temple in Jerusalem. Convinced that they now had the power to overcome the hated Romans, they revolted. The result was complete disaster. After a terrible siege, the Romans armies broke into the city, butchered the people, burned the temple, and destroyed everything. Satan planned this great battle, bringing Jew and Roman together to annihilate the church. Instead the land beast and the sea beast turned on each other. The hatred and power which was assembled against God was redirected against God's enemies. The Jews brought God's wrath upon Rome, and Rome brought God's wrath upon Jerusalem. And that was the end.

For 2,000 years people have read Revelation as though John were writing specifically to them. He was not, of course. John wrote to first century Christians to encourage them and strengthen their faith for the difficulties that lay ahead. One author puts it this way.

It must now be apparent how impossible it is to maintain that, when John set out to give warning about “what is bound to happen soon” (i.I), he included in these immediate expectations the end of the world. The utmost limit of his prophetic vision was the end of Rome’s world, which he believed to be inherent in her forthcoming persecution of the church. In her attack on the church Rome would let loose into the world powers which would compass her own downfall. To describe this conviction he uses eschatological language, and in this limited use of eschatological language he was true to his calling as a prophet. Amos had a vision of the End, but it was the end of Israel’s world: “the end has come upon my people Israel” (Amos viii.2). Daniel had visions of the End, but for him the only end that mattered was “when the power of the persecutor of the holy people comes to an end” (Dan. xii. 7)...Broadly speaking, it is true to say that no prophet ever used eschatological language except to give theological depth and urgency to the historical crisis which he and his people were facing at the moment. John, too, has had his visions of the End, but, because he had learnt his theology at the foot of the Cross, he knew that an end could also be a beginning.¹

The last bowl was the end of the plagues. It was the end of God’s wrath against those murderers who had persecuted the church. It was also the end of John’s world. He, and all the apostles, and everyone in the world had recognized the temple in Jerusalem as a particularly holy place. Even the Romans revered it until the Jewish revolt. Now the temple was burned and Jerusalem was destroyed. It is impossible for us to grasp the magnitude of this devastation. But even more profoundly, this was the end of the Old Covenant. After the seventh bowl sacrifices were never again offered to God. For 40 years Old Covenant religion overlapped with the New Covenant. Even the apostles prayed in the temple in Jerusalem while preaching the gospel of Jesus. Meanwhile God had occupied his new temple, the church. Now the old temple is gone, and all that remains is the church. But indeed this ushers in a new beginning, which is the topic of the last two chapters of Revelation.

Rest for Conquerors

To conclude I would like us to consider what it means to be blessed by God. What does your life look like when you are blessed by God? Does a blessed life consist of getting good grades on your exams and completing your projects on time? Is it good friends with whom you can enjoy the weekends? Does God’s blessing include a satisfying and financially rewarding job? Surely it must include a wonderful man or woman who loves you. Shall we add children to the list? No doubt, all these are blessings from God. We could even find scripture verses which say specifically that success, job, mate, and children are gifts from God. But would you ever think to include death as one of God’s blessings?

Let us go back to chapter 14:13. ““Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord...”” Does this verse strike you as odd? Or do you even find it offensive? Is God making light here of the tragedy of death? Is God callous to the pain – physical and emotional – that death entails? Is this just an attempt to pump up gullible believers to fight God’s wars for Him? Is God a shrewder, more powerful, more manipulative leader than George Bush who tricked us into the war in Iraq to serve his own purposes? What, exactly, is blessed about death?

First, God does see death as a tragedy. You only have to look at Jesus as He stood before the tomb of Lazarus. His tears and His tender words to Mary and Martha show that God weeps with us in our suffering – especially at death. But the greatest tragedy about death is that it was totally unnecessary. Death was not part of creation. God never intended that man should die. God created man as an eternal being. Death entered this world as a result of Adam’s sin. Ever since, death has been corrupting the whole world, bringing upon us disease, crime, and war. As long as we are in this world, we cannot escape the reality of

¹ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1966) pp. 209 -210.

death.

The reason death is a blessing for Christians is that it is the means of escape. By death we may escape this dying world and enter an eternal world where there is no death. Life is in Jesus, and to be with Jesus is eternal life. So it is good to trade this fading life on earth for eternal life with Jesus.

Verse 13 continues, “‘Blessed indeed,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!’” This tells us two additional blessings of death. First, by death we find rest. Verse 11 tells us that those who worship the beast have no rest. Unbelievers may seem to have a good life – and some do for a while. But there is no rest for them. Life is a continual rat race, and then they die. Even in death they have no rest. Eternity is continual torment for them. Christians have real rest here, but it is partial and fleeting. All your life you will experience a never-ending parade of struggles. Periodically you may find some rest in a vacation or happy event, and then you go back to the grind. But there is the promise of complete, permanent rest. Death is the passage to that rest. The other blessing of death is that your works go with you. You will be able to enjoy the fruit of your labors in this life when you enter eternity.

Death is always awful, but the alternative is worse. It would be horrible to be trapped on this earth forever. Your greatest hope is to escape and live with Jesus. Sadly, many Christians cling to this life. When death approaches, they grasp at any means of prolonging their life a little more. This is pathetic. It is like a little boy refusing to leave his mud puddle to go on a trip to the beach. The application of this passage for Christians is to live without fearing death. Learn to face death as a blessing from God, a hero’s welcome into the Eternal Kingdom. If you do not believe in Jesus, the application for you is to flee God’s anger. Believe in Jesus tonight. Then you also will be able to enter eternal life.

The 144,000 were the firstfruits of the harvest. Jesus loves all His people enough to gather them into their eternal home. Ultimately He will harvest all Christians. All believers will be blessed with death. Then when the last Christian is gathered, eternity begins!

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