

## **Revelation Ch. 16: The Seven Bowls of Wrath**

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In the seven bowls, God's wrath was to be complete (15:1). While the trumpets described events of the war as directed from heaven, these describe God's judgment fully executed from the perspective of those on earth, both from those carrying out God's judgment (Rome), and those being punished (Israel).

### **Verses 1-2**

**Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, "Go and pour out the bowls of the wrath of God on the earth." So the first went and poured out his bowl upon the earth, and a foul and loathsome sore came upon men who had the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image.**

The temple symbolizes the presence of God both in heaven and amongst His people, the church (7:15; 11:19; 15:5-7), and ties in with the fact that the wrath of God was to be poured out as vengeance for His people (6:9-11; 14:17-20; 18:20). The earth symbolizes the people affected by these events, namely the Jews and Romans striving in the war. As with the events described by the trumpets (Ch. 8-9), the foul and loathsome sore is reminiscent of the plagues of Egypt (cf. Ex. 9:9-11).

This refers to anyone who bowed down to the beast, both in connection with the civil wars and uprisings within the empire at that time (2:22; Matt. 24:6, 21; Tacitus, *The Histories* 1.2), and perhaps also those Jews that wished to continue in subjection to Rome, but were slain by their rebellious countrymen (Josephus, *Wars* 2.13.6; cf. *Wars* 2.14.9).

### **Verse 3**

**Then the second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it became blood as of a dead man; and every living creature in the sea died.**

Like the second trumpet, the second bowl of wrath affects the sea (8:8, 9). The events of the second trumpet caused only a third of the sea to become blood, while this pictures the entire sea as such.

This may refer to the same events, but from the perspective of those being punished. To them, their entire world was falling apart. As mentioned, Josephus tells of calamities at sea, and describes the waters being filled with dead bodies (*Wars* 3.9.3; 3.10.9).

Since waters often symbolize society (17:15), this could also be a general description of the war as a whole (cf. 6:4).

### **Verse 4**

**Then the third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood.**

The third trumpet caused a star named Wormwood to make the rivers and springs of water bitter (8:10, 11), whereas the third bowl of wrath causes them to become blood. Perhaps those channels of influence, power, and communication accessed by the leadership were being severed as those who were prominent in the rebellion fell. This may also symbolize news of bloodshed that caused the bitterness already described.

### **Verses 5-6**

**And I heard the angel of the waters saying: “You are righteous, O Lord, The One who is and who was and who is to be, because You have judged these things. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink. For it is their just due.”**

This wicked generation was paying for their sins as they drank the cup of the wine of His wrath (14:10; 16:19; Isa. 49:26; cf. Matt. 23:32; 1 Thes. 2:16; Josephus, Wars 5.11.1). This is a picture of vengeance and just recompense (Heb. 10:28-31). This is one of the key verses of the entire book. Because God is righteous and just, these things had to occur. The saints and prophets refer to all God's people up to this time, and their blood would be required of this generation (17:6; cf. Matt. 23:32-35; 27:25; Lk. 11:50; Rev. 18:20, 24).

#### **Verse 7**

**And I heard another from the altar saying, “Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments.”**

The altar represents prayers being heard (6:9; 8:5, 6; 9:13; 14:18). The cries for vengeance are being answered as His wrath is poured out.

#### **Verses 8-9**

**Then the fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and power was given to him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat, and they blasphemed the name of God who has power over these plagues; and they did not repent and give Him glory.**

Whereas the servants of God would be protected from such things (7:16), and had hope of better days in the midst of trials (2:10; Phi. 4:7), the wicked were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed God as a result. When times get tough, the wicked blaspheme God (cf. 2:9).

A one word description of the Roman-Jewish War may be fire, as Josephus describes a land filled with fire and blood (8:5; 9:17-21; Wars 3.4.1; 4.8.1; 4.9.9; 5.6.2; 6.5.1-4; 6.6.3). Throughout the war, the seditious Jews acted contrary to the laws of God, and never repented (9:20; Wars 4.6.3; 6.2.3-5).

#### **Verses 10-11**

**Then the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom became full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues because of the pain. They blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and did not repent of their deeds.**

This refers to the uprisings and civil wars within the empire during this time (Tacitus, The Histories 1.2). In the last years of his reign, Nero grew fearful of assassination. In June 68 AD, he committed suicide (cf. 13:9, 10), throwing the empire into an uproar (Josephus, Wars Preface 2). From June 68 AD to December 69 AD, four emperors arose, the last of which was Vespasian, who had left his post in Judea to secure the throne (Wars 4.9.2; 4.11.1-5).

#### **Verse 12**

**Then the sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, so that the way of the kings from the east might be prepared.**

The sixth trumpet released the angels of destruction bound at the river Euphrates, a natural border, representing the Roman army sweeping across the land from the ends of the earth (9:13, 14). The idea of a border makes sense here, in that the water needed to be dried up in order to prepare the way for the kings of the east.

The water drying up represents the effects of the uprisings and revolts within the empire. Armies

stationed to guard the land were moved out of place in order to subdue these revolts (cf. Josephus, Wars 5.1.6). This left the empire more vulnerable to invasion (cf. Jer. 50:38, 41).

Josephus records that the Jews “hoped that all of their nation which were beyond Euphrates would have raised an insurrection together with them” (Wars Preface 2). However, Rome was able to subdue the revolts and secure the empire (Wars 7.4.2-3).

#### **Verses 13-14**

**And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. For they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty.**

Frogs jump in every direction, and ultimately cover everything (cf. Ex. 8:1-14). So also would it be with the teachings of these three. Satan and his vessels, the Roman Empire and its pagan religions would unite the empire (17:17) by means of deceptive signs (cf. 13:13, 14; 19:20; Matt. 24:24; 1 Tim. 4:1).

This is a picture of the Romans regrouping after Vespasian took the throne in December 69 AD. His son Titus, now in command, gathered the troops to lay siege to Jerusalem (Wars 4.11.5; 5.1.6; 5.2.1). It is the fall of Jerusalem that is the great day of God Almighty (6:17; cf. Zeph. 1:14, 15; Joel 2:1-11; Joel 2:31; Acts 2:19-20).

Satan no doubt hoped to stamp out the church along with Jerusalem. Little did he know that his minions were uniting to fulfill God's purpose (11:15; 17:16, 17; cf. Isa. 10:5-7; 13:3-5).

#### **Verse 15**

**Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame.**

God does not forget His people, even in the darkest of times (18:4; cf. 14:13; 19:9). The fact that He was coming as a thief does not preclude the fact that there were warning signs. The exact hour of their judgment was coming, and had those wicked men knew what awaited them, they may have repented (2:5, 16; 3:3, 11; 22:7, 12, 20; Lk. 19:44; cf. Josephus, Wars 6.2.1; Matt. 24:43). The same goes for men today (Jas. 4:14; 2 Pet. 3:10).

Since we do not know when the Lord will come (cf. Matt. 24:36), nor when our time on this earth will be over, we ought to keep our garments clean, walking in the light of the gospel (3:4; 7:14; 19:18; Gal. 3:27; 1 Jn. 1:7). Those who defile those garments and do not live rightly, will be found naked and exposed (3:17; cf. 2 Cor. 5:3), and bring shame upon themselves and the church.

#### **Verse 16**

**And they gathered them together to the place called in Hebrew, Armageddon.**

The name is in Hebrew, fitting in with the Hebrew thought of the whole book (cf. 9:11; 13:18). Many have speculated about Armageddon, which is often depicted as some final epic battle between good and evil to be fought at the end of time. However, since the gathering has to do with Roman forces (v. 14), it must fit this context.

Armageddon is the *gathering place* for the battle of the great day of God Almighty, which does not

necessitate a “Battle of Armageddon.” It does not say the gathering place is the place of battle, nor does it say that it is a battle between good and evil. The battle could be (and is) elsewhere. It refers to the Roman-Jewish war, and more specifically in this case, Titus gathering armies before laying siege to Jerusalem (Josephus, Wars 4.11.5; 5.1.1; 5.1.6). The fall of Jerusalem is the great day spoken about in Revelation (6:17; 16:14; 18:8).

Please see the handout on Armageddon for more detailed notes regarding this symbol.

### **Verse 17**

**Then the seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, “It is done!”**

The mystery is finished (10:7), and the wrath of God is complete (15:1). The significance of the air may be indicative of the fact that nothing was left of Jerusalem as the war came to an end (Josephus, Wars 6.10.1; 7.1.1). Just as Jesus cried “It is finished” in connection with His mission on earth being fulfilled, so also was this (cf. John 19:30).

### **Verse 18**

**And there were noises and thunderings and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake, such a mighty and great earthquake as had not occurred since men were on the earth.**

The power and wrath of God was felt in its full force (4:5; 6:12; 8:5; 11:19; cf. Matt. 27:51).

### **Verse 19**

**Now the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. And great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath.**

During the hiatus, the great city, Jerusalem (11:8; 14:8) divided into three factions, all fighting against one another for control of the city. Josephus records:

When therefore Titus had marched over that desert which lies between Egypt and Syria, in the manner forementioned, he came to Caesarea, having resolved to set his forces in order at that place, before he began the war. Nay, indeed, while he was assisting his father at Alexandria, in settling that government which had been newly conferred upon them by God, it so happened that the sedition at Jerusalem was revived, and parted into three factions, and that one faction fought against the other; which partition in such evil cases may be said to be a good thing, and the effect of Divine justice. (Wars 5.1.1)

As this was happening, the empire under Vespasian was stabilizing, and subduing the revolts (Wars 4.11.5; cf. Wars 7.4.1-3), as Titus marched for Jerusalem (Wars 5.1.6). Amidst the uproar throughout the empire, what needed to happen in Jerusalem was never forgotten (14:8; Matt. 23-24; Mk. 13; Lk. 21; cf. Isa. 51:17-23; Jer. 9:9).

### **Verses 20-21**

**Then every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. And great hail from heaven fell upon men, each hailstone about the weight of a talent. Men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, since that plague was exceedingly great.**

This is the realization of what was promised (6:14), the nation was at an end. The great hail ties in with the symbols of a storm (1:7; 11:19; 16:18), but also accords with the description of the Roman engines

of war, such as the catapult. Josephus records:

Now the stones that were cast were of the weight of a talent, and were carried two furlongs and further. The blow they gave was no way to be sustained, not only by those that stood first in the way, but by those that were beyond them for a great space. As for the Jews, they at first watched the coming of the stone, for it was of a white color, and could therefore not only be perceived by the great noise it made, but could be seen also before it came by its brightness (Wars 5.6.3; cf. Wars 3.7.9)

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