**THE BOWLS OF WRATH**

**REVELATION CHAPTER 16**

In our study of Revelation we are approaching the end of the seven-year Tribulation period. Beginning with the seal judgments in Chaps 6 and 7 and then with the trumpet judgments in Chaps 8 thru 11, God has been pouring out His wrath on a lost world. As we have seen these are terrible judgments – natural disasters, cosmic disturbances, the horrific unleashing of evil forces. These judgments bring much pain, suffering and death.

So, why is God doing this? Is He a mean God who enjoys watching people suffer? No. I contend that His judgments are a last-ditch effort on His part to get man’s attention. God desires that all lost people – even the most hardened of hearts – repent, turn to Jesus Christ and be saved before He destroys it all at the end of history.

I have mentioned this before, but it is worth mentioning again. God’s nature is one of both love and holiness. His great love for us compelled Him to send His only Son to die for our sins so that we could be restored to full fellowship with Him – not just in this life, but also for all of eternity. God’s holiness, however, means that He cannot tolerate sin. Sin must be dealt with. In the Book of Revelation we see on display both these aspects of God’s divine nature. He extends grace time after time. Some people as we have seen take full advantage of God’s grace and are saved. But as we have observed in our study, most people ignore God. They thumb their noses at God’s love and grace right up to the end. As a result they miss their opportunity to be saved. It is a sad commentary on man’s spiritual condition.

With that background let the bowl judgments begin…

V 1-2: 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.” So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.

The same word used for “sores” here is the word in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) for boils in the story of the Egyptian plagues. Most Bible scholars believe these verses refer to a plague of boils that will be inflicted on mankind. In the middle of the Tribulation, in Revelation Chapters 13 and 14 the antichrist was set up as an object of worship. Who then is it that will receive these awful sores? Those who worship the antichrist. Those who have received the mark of the beast. Those who repented and have been saved during the Tribulation and do not bear the mark of the beast will be spared – just as God spared the Israelites during the plagues of Egypt in the Book of Exodus.

V 3: The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea.

Just use your imagination for a moment. If you will recall in a previous judgment, God caused one-third of the sea to turn to blood. At that time one-third of all the fish, whales, sharks, dolphins and other aquatic life died. This judgment here involves the entire sea and it kills everything that lives in the ocean. Dead sea animals float to the top, their decaying bodies give off a horrible stench, not to mention diseases caused as they wash up on shore. It is a worldwide ecological and commercial disaster! The earth’s water and food supply are dealt a terrible blow by the hand of God.

V 4-5: The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. 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.”

Now God destroys the only remaining sources of fresh water as the rivers and underground aquifers turn to blood. Eventually the lakes and reservoirs they feed will become blood. This breeds disease and pestilence and, undoubtedly, sends the world into a state of panic and confusion as they seek the precious commodity of water needed to sustain life.

V 6-7: “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!”

“They deserve it,” the angel says. Because they shed the blood of the saints and the prophets. Now they can drink blood as their judgment! Here God at long last is vindicating those martyrs who cried out from underneath the altar back in Rev 6:10, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Here is God’s answer to their cry. He pours out His wrath on the antichrist and all his followers – the ones responsible for killing all those dear Tribulation saints we saw last week worshipping around the throne.

V 8-9: The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. 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.

Have you ever been through one of those Texas summers where every day is above 100 degrees and it doesn’t rain for months on end? Well that is nothing compared to this! God’s judgment of intense and painful heat combined with a lack of fresh water has got to be literal hell on earth. God is giving a lost world a taste of things to come by showing them a glimpse of what eternal separation from God in hell will be like.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus described hell this way – “and in Hades, being in torment, he (the rich man) lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame’” (Luke 16:23-24). So, you would think that this preview of coming attractions would convince lost mankind to cry out for mercy and be saved. But that is not at all what we see here. In fact, inexplicably, the very opposite takes place! Instead they dig in their heels and refuse to repent.

V 10-11: 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.

As we have mentioned before the beast is the antichrist. This judgment focuses on the headquarters of the antichrist – the center of commerce, religion, government and evil during the Tribulation period. The judgment of darkness fulfills the prophecy of Amos 5:18 – “Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light.” Zephaniah 1:15 prophesied a similar judgment in “the day of wrath” predicting “a day of darkness and gloom.” Jesus himself said, “But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light” (Mark 13:24). Again they will not repent. They curse God for their pain and sores.” Unrepentant people always cast the blame on God or others, but never accept any personal responsibility for what happens to them. It is always someone else’s fault. This attitude is clearly reflected here.

V 12: The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east.

The great Euphrates River dries up. This great physical barrier 1,800 miles long, 300-1200 yards wide and some 30 feet deep miraculously dries up – it is divinely removed. This act of God, in effect, allows the “kings from the east” to make their way toward Armageddon. We know that from reading ahead to verse 16. Of course, Armageddon will be the site of a famous battle when Jesus returns in Chapter 19.

So, who are these kings from the east? There are a number of possible interpretations and we do not have the time to explore them all. As with most of my interpretation of this book, I hold to a literal interpretation that this speaks about a massive invasion of armies from the east – possibly from the nations of Japan, China and India. Armies from all over the earth, united for evil with the antichrist against God, will eventually make their way to the Megiddo Valley and mobilize into battle against Jesus Christ when He returns.

V 13-14: And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty.

We have established that the dragon is Satan, the counterpart to God the Father; the beast is the antichrist, the counterpart to God the Son; and the false prophet, who points everyone to the antichrist as the center of worship, is the counterpart to God the Holy Spirit. This represents what I referred to previously as the “Unholy Trinity.” Out of their evil mouths come three unclean spirits symbolized by frogs. Frogs are considered loathsome and unclean because of where they live – dirty ponds and swampy areas. What a perfect symbol for evil! These frog-like spirits deceive the nations of the whole world by summoning their armies to do battle against God. No doubt Satan has convinced the world that it is God alone that is to blame for all the mess the world is in.

Now there is a parenthetical statement made by our Lord, a commentary for the reader to consider at this point…

V 15: ("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 exposed!")

Jesus is speaking here. His message is directed at those Tribulation saints on the earth at this time. Here He assures them that He has not forgotten them. They are encouraged to remain watchful for the Lord’s return and to retain the garments of righteousness – continue to do what is right even in the most godless of times. In a broader context this is a challenge, not just to the Tribulation saints, but also for all generations of Christians.

V 16: And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

The armies of the lost are gathered to do battle and the saints are prepared. God’s final judgment is about to strike the earth – the final act of God preceding the second coming of Christ.

V 17-21: 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!” 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. 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. And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found. 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.

The final judgment of God appears in the form of the world’s greatest earthquake. It is greater than any earthquake mankind has ever known. There have been a lot of terrible earthquakes recorded in history – we are aware of at least nine that have killed at least 100,000 people and 28 that killed at least 30,000. The worst earthquake ever occurred around Shaanxi, China in 1556 killing 850,000 people. The earthquake mentioned in these verses is not regional, but shakes the entire world. It destroys the capital city of the world, Babylon, as well as all the cities of the world. Every island in the world disappears. The mountains crumble and are no more.

If all of that were not enough, huge hailstones rain down from heaven bombarding the earth. The Bible does not go into a whole lot of detail as to the damage caused, but you can just imagine what kind of damage a 100-lb hailstone will do – they are quite literally solid missiles of ice! All we are told by John is that the plague of hailstones “was so severe.”

Verse 21 tells us the reaction of the lost world to God’s final judgment – men cursed God. Nothing is going to make them turn to God. They are bent on hell and destruction. The hardened hearts we see here are really not so different from those that we see in our day. And they are really no different than they were 100 years ago or 1000 years ago. Sin has blinded them! Satan has deceived them. They are doomed and without hope.

How do you close out a lesson like this? What is the application for us in our day and time? For that we turn to the Book of Romans. Paul describes the people living in his day like this – “God shows His anger from heaven against all sinful, evil men who push away the truth from them…Since the earliest of times men have seen the earth and sky all God made, and have known of His existence and great eternal power. So they will have no excuse when they stand before God at Judgment Day. Yes, they knew about Him all right, but they would not admit it or worship Him or even thank Him for all His daily care. And after a while they began to think up silly ideas of what God was like and what He wanted them to do. The result was that their foolish minds became dark and confused. Claiming themselves to be wise without God, they became utter fools instead…so it was that when they gave God up and would not acknowledge Him, God gave them up to doing everything their evil minds could think of. Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness and sin, of greed and hate, envy, murder, fighting, lying, bitterness and gossip.” (Romans 1:18,20-22,28-29 Living Letters)

Lost people of Paul’s day are just like the lost people of today and of Revelation Ch 16. They basically do not change. This is why we must tell those who are lost and headed for hell the truth. We must warn them to use a figure of speech that the bridge is out ahead. We need to let them know. Will they listen to us? Maybe. Maybe not. But if we say nothing then they will not know and will surely perish. At least if we tell them the truth, they will have a chance. Something to think about.

Well, Jesus returns in Chapter 19. But before we get there, we will look at Chapters 17 and 18. These chapters give us greater insight into the worldly regime of the antichrist during the last days of the Tribulation.