

Bowling for Judgment

What is your reaction when you hurt someone and sin against the Lord? Is it a mere shrug of the shoulders and a “Sorry, nobody’s perfect!?” Or is it a deep sense of regret and a desire to never do it again? The attitude of many is illustrated by this note printed in The New Yorker magazine. It was left inside a stolen Trans Am in Los Angeles, which was later recovered by police and returned to the owner. In the thief’s own handwriting, is read:

Your CB is in the trunk. The radio is gone because I couldn't stop my friend from taking it (insurance will cover that). Sorry it had to be your car, but I was looking for one and the car lot left the key in and it was unattended. Your back tire loses a little air at times. Your brake light sometimes stays on when you drive (CHECK YOUR BRAKES!). This sucker eats a lot of gas! Don't know why you bought this kind. Hope this didn't put you out taking your car. I'd have liked a dealer's car. But this was all that was available. Sorry. NEEDS GAS!

Nice, huh? He steals a car, then launches into a critique of what’s wrong with it with a couple half-hearted “Sorrlys” thrown in. It’d be funny if it wasn’t typical. In many minds, all that is necessary to atone for our sins (from robbery to murder) is an “I’m sorry. Please forgive me. We all make mistakes. What gives you the right to judge me?” As a result, many offenders are shocked when sentence is carried out. “Where’s the mercy!” they scream, implying that society is just as wrong for enforcing justice. My question is, “Where’s the true repentance? Whatever happened to a “broken and contrite heart?” The kind God says He won’t despise.

Repentance isn’t something that comes easily to the human heart. Commenting on the subject, John Calvin wrote, “Let everyone search himself and he will find that he labors under this evil—that he would rather rend his garment than his heart.” How true! Most of are willing to say “Sorry” in a pinch, but to change our attitudes is more than we usually care to do.

A graphic example is Revelation chapter 15 and 16. For seven years, judgment has fallen on mankind, warnings from God issued by men and angels alike. But as the last seven plagues fall on the world, does man repent? No, he blames God for his suffering! That should be a warning when the Holy Spirit confronts sin in our lives. We need to remember that Christ is ready and willing to forgive everyone who turns to Him in repentance and faith. But we also need to remember that the sin most certain to blind us is our own.

1. THE BOWLS JUDGMENTS INTRODUCED

Most of this study will deal with the bowl judgments in chapter 16. But before we get to the judgments themselves, let’s take a moment to notice how they’re introduced in chapter 15. Chapter 15 is the shortest chapter in the Revelation, but it highlights three important facts.

A. God’s Wrath Will End

Verse 1 reads: “I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues, which are the last because with them God’s wrath is finished.” The original Greek reads, “Seven plagues—the last ones!” This means that this will be the last time that God will punish the world with plagues. The word “finished” reinforces the point because it is the same word that Jesus shouted from the Cross: “It is finished!” There He was announcing His final victory over sin. Here it refers to His judgment of the world. The world doesn’t deserve it, but God in His mercy will spare the world further judgment once the plagues are finished.

B. Heaven Will Sing at God's Judgment

Did you know we will sing in Heaven? That's good news for those of us who have always wanted to join the choir, but can't carry a tune. My mother-in-law was like that. Everyone in the family but she was blessed with the gift of song. But she claimed that in Heaven she would out-sing us all! And I have no doubt she will. And yet, even more important than that we'll sing is what we'll sing. John explains two things about our song.

First, he explains who will sing. Verse 2 describes a great multitude standing by a sea of glass mixed with fire. This means they are believers, for in the ancient world no one could cross the "sea" of marble before the king's throne without the king's permission. The same is true of our King. Only those who have had their sins washed clean in the blood of Christ have the right to enter God's presence. Furthermore, the fact that they've been "victorious over the beast" means that they are Tribulation saints who have been martyred for their faith. But in the end, they will be the final victors. How? The secret is the word "standing," In Jewish theology, that's a metaphor for resurrection. In other words, no matter how we suffer in this life, we who love Christ will live forever. This was Job's faith amid his suffering. He declared:

"I know that my Redeemer lives, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God."
(Job 19:25-26 KJV)

Second, he explains what they will sing. Verse 3 says they will sing the song of Moses. What does that mean? John is likening them to the ancient Israelites who were saved out of Egypt. So, what did they do once they got to the other side of the Red Sea? Exodus 15:2 says they sang a great song of praise for their deliverance. And in the same way, once these saints get to Heaven, the first they'll do as they stand before the crystal sea is sing a great song of praise to God for saving them from the Antichrist and the Great Tribulation.

C. God's Judgment Is Right

John says in verse 5, "After this I looked and in Heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the testimony was opened. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues." In other words, the plagues come from the holiest place in the universe—God's temple in Heaven. That's significant for two reasons. First, what is the only thing that can come out of God's temple? That which is holy! So, no more questioning the fairness of God! Second, it's significant because of what it follows—3 ½ years in which the beast has desecrated God's temple on earth, setting up His throne in that holy place and declaring himself to be God. But no more! God's temple in Heaven now erupts in perfect justice repaying Antichrist for his blasphemy on earth.

Now on to chapter 16 and what these final bowls of judgment will hold.

2. THE BOWL JUDGMENTS Poured OUT

BOWL #1: PAINFUL SORES

John begins, "Then I heard a loud voice (God's voice) from the temple saying to the seven angels, 'Go pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth.' The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image." The word "sores" is the word used in the Greek Old Testament to describe the boils that afflicted the Egyptians in Exodus 9. Various causes are suggested for these sores—radioactive fallout from a nuclear

exchange, a runaway strain of “super-bacteria” released in germ warfare, or some new disease not yet known to man and for which there is no cure. But whatever the cause, three things are clear about it:

1) Verse 2 says it is intended to punish “the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image.” Just as God protected the children of Israel who lived in Goshen from the plagues that fell on Egypt, so He’ll miraculously shield His people from the bowls of His wrath.

2) It will involve incredible pain. Anyone who has had a boil can tell you how badly it hurts. But imagine being covered with them from head to toe. A friend in high school named Doug suffered from boils on his face. Not only was it embarrassing, it was also painful. They burned. They itched. They wept. But in this case, there will be no relief from the pain. When we come to the fifth bowl judgment in verse 11, we find mankind still writhing in pain from these sores.

3) It will destroy human relations. Pain is a great revealer in that only a righteous person can handle it graciously. But the will be no “Jobs” afflicted in this day. It will be God’s enemies who suffer, and they will not suffer in silence. Verse 11 says they will curse God because of their pain. And if they’re bitter enough to curse God, imagine how they will treat one another.

Warren Wiersbe comments: “It is an awesome thought to consider almost the entire population of the world suffering from a painful malady that nothing can cure. Constant pain affects a person’s disposition so that he finds it difficult to get along with other people. Human relations during that period will certainly be at their worst.”

BOWL #2: THE OCEANS DIE

Verse 3 continues, “The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea died.” At the second trumpet in Revelation 8, a third of the sea and its creatures die. But now the suffering multiplies. All the seas now turn to blood and all its creatures die.

David Hocking comments, “Notice the sea actually ‘becomes’ blood (literal language), ‘as’ that of a dead man (figurative language). This means that the sea truly becomes blood first, and the creatures die as a result. There is no naturalistic explanation for this supernatural event.”

We’ve seen the results of many oil spills in recent years. One of the best known took place in Prince William Sound, killing hundreds of thousands of birds, sea otters, and other sea creatures. Until then it was considered the last pure spot on earth—a destination of “preppers” in case of worldwide disaster. But then the Valdez ran aground reminding us that when God pours out His judgment on the sea, there will be no safe place left to hide.

BOWL #3: FRESH WATER POLLUTED

Verse 4 adds, “The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood.” When the third trumpet was sounded, one-third of the rivers were polluted. But now all fresh water is turned to blood, leaving mankind nothing to drink. Think about that for a moment—how dependent we are on clean water? We learned this lesson years ago when staying at a friend’s cabin where the water was supplied by a small well. But the well ran dry, leaving us without any means of bathing, cooking, or washing our dishes. We had brought along enough soda pop to keep us from being thirsty. But soda pop does not last forever. Nor

can you wash in it. Such will be the situation when the third plague is poured out—all that will be left for dinking, washing, cooking, and bathing will be blood.

Even more interesting is why this plague is poured out. Verse 6 says, “For they have shed the blood of your saint and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink as they deserve.” One writer says, “In God’s government, the punishment fits the crime. Pharaoh tried to drown Jewish boy babies, so it was his army drowned in the Red Sea. Haman built gallows on which to hang Mordecai, but it was he himself who was hanged there. King Saul disobeyed God’s order to slay all the Amalekites, so he was slain by an Amalekite.” In the same way, Heaven gives the followers of Antichrist what they deserve. Since they have shed the blood of God’s people, it is only right that they should be forced to drink blood.

BOWL #4: SCORCHING HEAT

The fourth plague gives the beast’s followers a foretaste of hell. Verse 8 says, “The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire.” In an earlier judgment, the sun was dimmed a third leading to darkness on earth. But now the sunlight and its heat is intensified scorching everyone with a blazing heat that no sun block can ease. Anyone who has been on the desert knows how merciless the sun can be. Add to this the lack of water to quench man’s thirst, and the agony will be unbearable—a literal hell on earth. This should lead us to ask what the purpose of this plague is. John gives two reasons.

1) To punish beast worshipers. Verse 8 literally says, “The sun was given power to scorch the people with fire.” The definite article refers to a specific people we’ve already met. What people would that be? Those who have the mark of the beast. We are not told how, but any believers remaining alive at this time will be supernaturally be protected from judgment.

2) To prove that man’s problem is spiritual, not environmental. Notice, as painful as this plague is, not one soul repents. Instead, “they cursed the name of God who had control over these plagues.” Isn’t that interesting? It proves there are no atheists left on earth. Everyone knows there is a God in Heaven. But rather than humbly ask for His forgiveness, they blame Him for their punishment. “After all You have the power to stop this is you wanted to.”

This reminds me of Abraham’s statement to the rich man in Hades. Being in torment, he begged Abraham in Paradise to send Lazarus the beggar to warn his brothers of judgment. But Abraham said, “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.” “No, Father Abraham, the rich man begged, if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” But Abraham replied, “No, if they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.” How true! If the Good News of Jesus’ death and resurrection is not enough to win a person’s repentance, nothing will—not even a foretaste of hell.

BOWL #5: COMPLETE DARKNESS

The fifth judgment is also a foretaste of hell. Jude describes those in hell as “wandering stars for whom the blackness of darkness is reserved forever.” Verse 10 says the fifth bowl plunges the beast’s kingdom into total darkness. As in ancient Egypt, there was total darkness, but the Israelites in the land of Goshen had light; so, this too is a judgment that falls on unbelievers only. What is the outcome of this warning? Two things:

First, a further hardening of hearts. Rather than repenting of their sins and crying out for mercy, verse 11 says, “Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of Heaven because of their pains and

sores.” This is proof that judgment doesn’t always lead repentance. According to a study by the Justice Department, 63% of inmates released from state prisons are rearrested for a serious crime within three years. Of those under the age of 25 who have had eleven or more arrests, 94% are reincarcerated. Thus, it will be in this final time of wrath, with this exception—not one hardened sinner will be reformed!

Second, a final preparation for judgment. As we’ll see in a moment, this blackout allows the kings of the east to march into the Holy Land leading to the battle of Armageddon.

BOWL #6: THE BATTLE OF ARMAGEDDON

To the human eye, the world’s armies may seem to be gathering of their own accord. But verse 12 gives us a glimpse behind the scenes. First, it credits the work of demons. It says, “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. Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they got out to the kings of the whole world to gather them for the battle of the great day of Almighty God.” Furthermore, the last line of verse 14 adds something even more important—the sovereignty of God. In his pride, Satan forgets that God is so great that He can use even the greatest evil to accomplish His will. That was true at the Cross. The devil’s greatest victory turned out to be his greatest defeat. So, it will be when he gathers the nations together in the valley of Megiddo! His attempt to rule this world through Antichrist will be “the great day of Almighty God.”

Where will it happen? Verse 16 says, “Then they gathered the kings together to that place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.” The name comes from two smaller words—**Har** meaning “**hill**” and **Megiddo** meaning “**slaughter**.” This is the hill country in southern Galilee that overlooks what Napoleon called “the most natural battlefield of the whole earth”—14 miles wide and 21 miles long. This is where Gideon defeated the Midianites. Here the Roman legions marched on the way to their ancient conquests. Here British General Allenby defeated the Ottoman Turks in 1917. And here the world will wage its final war again God and man.

What makes this possible is the drying up of the Euphrates River in verse 12. This allows the armies of Asia to march into the Holy Land. Some mistakenly identify these soldiers with the 200 million horsemen in Revelation 9. But, in my opinion, this is a different army. That was an army of demons that kills one-third of mankind with plagues. But this is the final human conflict towards which mankind is headed even now. On September 2, 1945, while supervising of our peace treaty with Japan which ended World War II, General Douglas MacArthur warned, “We have had our last chance. If we will not devise something greater and more equitable than war, Armageddon will be at our door.” He was right!

Is there any hope? Yes, it is found in Jesus’ promise right in the middle of this judgment. He pleads with us in verse 15, “Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamelessly exposed.”

BOWL #7: A MASSIVE EARTHQUAKE AND GIANT HAILSTONES

Finally, verse 17 describes the seventh bowl of judgment—an earthquake so massive that it will alter the topography of the entire earth. John says every major city of the world (New York, Tokyo, London, Mumbai, Mexico City) will be destroyed, every island (Hawaii, the Greek islands, the Philippines, all the Caribbean islands) will be submerged, and every mountain (Mount Everest, Denali, Mount Fuji) will crumble. Then, if that’s not enough, giant hailstones weighing 100 pounds each will fall from Heaven crushing men under their weight.

What will be the impact on men's hearts? None whatsoever! Like Pharaoh in the Old Testament, the heart of every unbeliever will be so hardened that not one soul will turn to Christ. William Newell used to say, "If men are not won by grace, they will never be won." We see that here. Instead of turning to Christ in repentance, John says they will curse "God because of the plague." By the way, that is perfect justice at work. For in keeping with the Law of Moses, what was the penalty for blasphemy? Death by stoning! (Leviticus 24:16)

This raises a troubling question for many people. How can a loving God be responsible for such judgment? Doesn't this confirm the bitterness of many unbelievers that God may be great but He isn't good? My answer is: No! What it affirms is two things: 1) God's loving desire that no one perish. 2) Man's ingratitude towards God's mercy and his unwillingness to repent.

R. C. Sproul shared an example in his book, Holiness of God. On the first day of classes at the Christian College where he taught, he told students that there would be three short papers due during the term. The first was due the end of September, the second the end of October, and the third the end of November. No extensions would be given except in cases of illness or a death in the family. Otherwise, late papers would receive an "F." The students nodded their understanding. On the last day of September, 225 students turned in their papers, but 25 stood quaking in terror begging for an extension. In mercy, Dr. Sproul relented and gave them more time. The students expressed their thanks and promised that they had learned their lesson.

Then came the last day of October. 200 had papers; 50 did not. They were nervous, but not panicky. "Professor," it was Homecoming. Besides it's mid-term and all our other papers are due too. Please give us one more chance. It won't happen again." Once more he relented, but made it clear that this was it. "If you are late for the next paper, it will be an 'F.' No excuses. No whining. Is that clear?" "O, yes, Professor. You are terrific. We love you Professor Sproul." So, what happened the last day of November? 150 students came with papers in hand. The other 100 strolled into class utterly unconcerned. "Where are your term papers?" One student said it all, "O don't worry Prof! We're working on them. We'll have them in a couple days. No sweat!"

Dr. Sproul writes, "I picked up my lethal black grade book and began taking down names. 'Johnson! Do you have your paper?' 'No, sir,' came the reply. 'F,' I said as I wrote the grade in my book. 'Muldaney! Do you have your paper?' Again, 'No, sir' was the reply. I marked another 'F' in my grade book. The students reacted with unmitigated fury. They howled in protest, screaming, 'That's not fair!' I looked at one of the howling students. 'Lavery! You think it's not fair?' 'No,' he growled. 'I see. It's justice you want? I seem to recall that your last paper was also late. If you insist on justice, you will get it. I will not only give you an 'F' on this paper, but I'll also change your last grade to the 'F' you so richly deserved.' The student was stunned. He had no more arguments to make. He apologized for being hasty and was suddenly happy to settle for one 'F' instead of two. The students had quickly taken my mercy for granted. They assumed it. When justice suddenly fell, it came as a shock and they were outraged. This, after only two doses of mercy in the space of two months."

So, it is with God's mercy, except that He has been immeasurably more patient with us. But He won't be forever. One day His judgment will fall, and when it does, no one will be able to find fault with Him. For if He gave us what we deserve, no one would be forgiven. Therefore, what should we do? Welcome God's grace this very moment and receive Christ's forgiveness while you can. For the offer will soon expire and only judgment will remain. Repentance does not come easily to the human heart. In fact, apart from the gracious work of the Holy Spirit, no one ever repents. So, respond now to His offer of salvation and make peace with God while your heart is still soft. Of if you have repented and believed, then remember why He's left you here on earth—to share His love with as many others as you can.