

15. The Bowl Judgments (*Chapter 16*)**a. The Command (*16:1*)**

After watching the angelic procession out of the Temple, John hears a loud voice commanding them to pour out the bowls of the wrath of God. In the next twenty verses the apostle goes on to describe the horrors of the bowl judgments.

Before we go on, a few issues need to be addressed. First of all, many of these plagues correspond to the grim realities of Hell—intense heat, no water to cool the tongue, and total darkness. Secondly, there seems to be a strong correlation between some of these plagues and the wonders worked by Moses: the rivers turning into blood, the sores, and darkness are obvious, but we should caution ourselves from taking these similarities too far. Finally, many commentators believe that the seven bowl judgments simply restate the seven trumpet judgments, retelling the same events. This theory is known as recapitulation.⁴¹ Support for this interpretation of Revelation is grounded on some of the similarities in the chart below:

Seven Trumpets	Seven Bowls
1 earth (8:7)	1 earth (16:2)
2 sea (8:8–9)	2 sea (16:3)
3 rivers, springs (8:10–11)	3 rivers, springs (16:4–5)
4 sun, moon, stars (8:12)	4 sun (16:8)
5 pit of the Abyss (9:1)	5 throne of the beast (16:10)
6 river Euphrates (9:13–14)	6 river Euphrates (16:12)
7 lightning, hail (11:15, 19)	7 lightning, hail (16:17, 21)

The commentators who hold to this view of Revelation tend to shy away from a literal approach to the book, as they don't see a natural progression of future events within Revelation. Further, in order to make the system fit, they have to either over- or under-emphasize certain aspects of the judgments. The problem with this analysis is that this

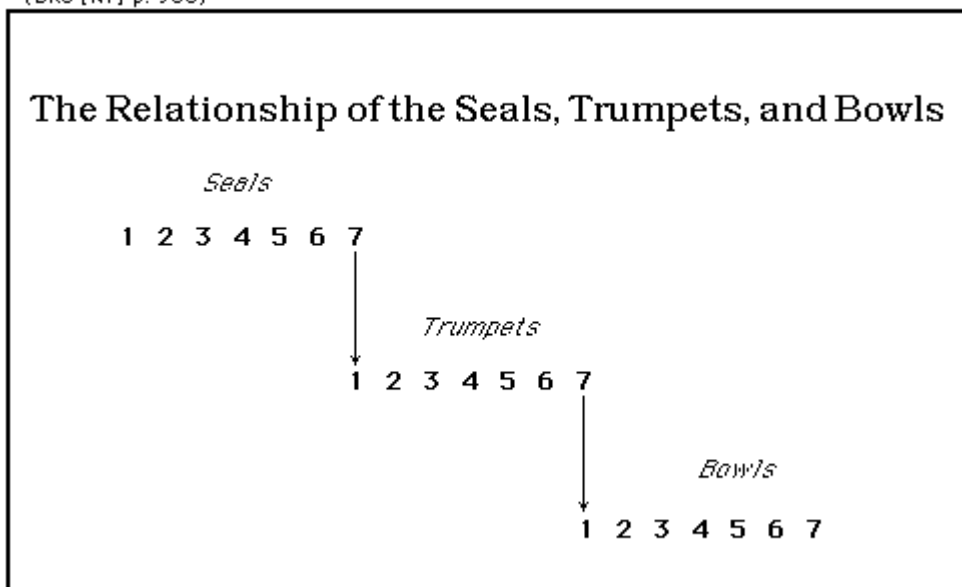
⁴¹ It should be noted that this literary device does take place in the Bible and even in Revelation. For instance, in Genesis 2 God gives an account of the creation of Man from a different perspective than He does in Genesis 1:26-31. Further, Revelation 17-18 describes the destruction of Babylon in great detail while an Angel in Revelation 14:8 declares that Babylon has fallen. The bowl judgments in chapter 16 also indicate that all of the wrath of God has been poured out - thus, nothing would be left for Babylon if it did not fall during the duration of the Bowl judgments. In each of these cases, it should be observed that there is contextual warrant for seeing the overlap, the facts do not contradict each other, and there are strong parallels within the two accounts.

parallelism does not hold when we interpret the judgments literally (we will go through this exercise as we tackle the bowl judgments). Further, this fails to take into account the escalation of God’s wrath which is so apparent in the successive judgments. Finally, the absence of the seventh single seal judgment makes it difficult to hold all three sets of judgments in strict parallel. Consider the chart below.

	Seal Judgments	Trumpet Judgments	Bowl Judgments
1	Peaceful Conquest	1/3 of Vegetation Burned	Malignant Sores
2	Warfare	1/3 Sea becomes Blood	Sea Into Blood
3	Famine	1/3 Fresh Water turns Bitter	Fresh Water Blood
4	Death to 1/4 of Earth	Heavenly Bodies Dark	Men Scorched
5	Vengeance Invoked	Demonic Locust Hoard	Darkness
6	Cosmic Upheavals	1/3 of People Killed	Gathering for Battle
7	???????	A Storm of Anticipation	Babylon Judged

Thus, it seems better to see the progression of the judgments in a “telescopic” pattern as shown in the chart below.

(BKC [NT] p. 950)



As we progress through our study of the bowl judgments, we will show how this parallelism does not hold.

b. The First Bowl Judgment (16:2)

In response to the command from the loud voice, the angel pours out the first bowl of wrath. Consequently, God afflicts all those who had the mark of the beast with “loathsome and malignant” sores, inflamed and festering and refusing to be healed. No doubt many

will recall the sixth Egyptian plague in which God smote the people with boils (*Exodus 9:9-11*).

Thought Question: Why are only the followers of the Beast afflicted (cf. *16:1*)?

Note: This judgment is not even remotely similar to the burning of one-third of the earth's vegetation, nor the bloodless war of the Antichrist.

c. The Second Bowl Judgment (16:3)

To the horror of millions, the oceans will turn into blood, causing the billions of fish, marine mammals, and invertebrates to die. It is unknown whether or not the seas actually become coagulated blood or if this is the phenomenon of the red tide.⁴²

Note: Notice the threefold increase of severity with this judgment as compared to the corresponding trumpet judgment.

d. The Third Bowl Judgment (16:4-7)

God will now turn all the rivers and springs into blood. This is similar to the first plague of Egypt in which the Nile became blood (*Exodus 7:20-25*), but instead of afflicting just the Nile, this judgment impacts all sources of fresh water. While the Egyptians had the option of digging around the Nile for water (*Ex. 7:24*), no such option will be afforded those who have taken the Mark. All the unsaved will be parched and in desperate need of water.

Thought Question: Why do you think God designed many of these judgments to be copies of the Egyptian plagues?

⁴² The phenomenon known as red tide occurs when the rapid reproduction of certain uni-cellular species results in large brownish red algal blooms. Some of these organisms are highly toxic and can kill fish and shellfish and kill or weaken the animals (including humans) that eat them in their turn or, in some cases, are merely exposed to water containing the organisms

Note: The corresponding trumpet judgment is two-thirds less severe, and there is no mention of the water turning into blood.

After this judgment, an angel exonerates God with the following song:

- i. ⁵ *And I heard the angel of the waters saying, “Righteous are You, who are and who were, O Holy One, because You judged these things;*

By righteous, the angel points out that God does no wrong. No detail has been overlooked by the one who had always existed from eternity past. Further, no corruption has skewed His judgment as He is Holy.

- ii. ⁶ *for they poured out the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink. They deserve it.”*

The punishment fits the crime. The Antichrist and his minions slaughtered the saints and the prophets, taking out their unholy wrath on God’s faithful. They freely poured out the blood of the saints, and now God serves them only blood to drink.

- iii. ⁷ *And I heard the altar saying, “Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments.”*

From the altar come the voices of the slaughtered saints (*Rev. 6:9-11*), who bless God and call His judgments true and righteous. God allots the exact amount of wrath deserved.

Thought Question: When we think about God’s wrath being poured out upon the unbelieving in the Tribulation or in Hell, why is it important to remember that His judgments are true and righteous?

e. **The Fourth Bowl Judgment (16:8-9)**

Moving on, the fourth angel pours out his bowl upon the sun, thereby cranking up the worldwide thermostat. With no fresh water to drink to cool their tongues, the citizens of the Satanic kingdom will find no rest from the unrelenting ultraviolet rays. Sunburns will be epidemic, the heat will be unbearable, and the melting of the polar ice caps will cause a catastrophic population shift.

In all of this, the afflicted refuse to turn to God for comfort. Rather, they weep and gnash their teeth; angrily denouncing the Lord and blaspheming His name. Like Pharaoh they harden their hearts and refuse to give God an ounce of glory.

Note: The sun is only mentioned in the fourth trumpet judgment, superficially linking it to this judgment.

f. **The Fifth Bowl Judgment (16:10-11)**

Perhaps a sense of irony is intended here. The people cry out for relief from the sun, and God gives it to them in the form of terrifying darkness. Shrouded in a blanket of black ink, people will be trapped in an inescapable darkness. No light or other luminaries will guide their way; they will be isolated, disoriented, and despairing. This plague of darkness will start in the capital of the anti-God empire and spread throughout the entire empire. Undoubtedly, those protected by God will escape this fate, as the wrath of God is not intended for them.

Still parched with thirst, roasted from the sun, and aching from the sores, people will continue to curse the Holy God who justly punishes them for their unrepentant hearts.

Note: There is hardly any correspondence between this and the demonic locusts of the fifth trumpet judgment.

g. **The Sixth Bowl Judgment (16:12-16)**

- i. **The Evaporation of the Euphrates (vs. 12)** Flowing from the snow pack of the mountains of Ararat, this 1,800-mile long river is one of the great rivers of the world. It was known as the eastern boundary of the land promised to Abraham as well as the Roman Empire. Perhaps the scorching sun completely melted away the snow, thereby emptying the source of the great river. Whatever the means, this is not the first time that this has happened. In *Isaiah 11:15-16* we read:

And the LORD will utterly destroy The tongue of the Sea of Egypt; And He will wave His hand over the River With His scorching wind; And He will strike it into seven streams And make men walk over dry-shod. And there will be a highway from Assyria For the remnant of His people who will be left, Just as there was for Israel In the day that they came up out of the land of Egypt.

In the above passage, the drying up of the Euphrates facilitates the return of the scattered Israelites. In the Revelation account, the dry riverbed will allow colossal armies to cross over in order to make war with the Jesus Christ and His saints (*Rev. 17:14*).

As we continue through the passage, we notice that the kings from the east will be leading their military in battle. Their precise identity and motive is not known, yet a brief survey of the previous chapters illumines their overall purpose: to destroy all those who have shown themselves loyal to Christ. We know from **17:14** that they make war with the saints; we also know from *verses 13-15* that these kings are deceived by servants of the Dragon. And as we know from **Revelation 12:17**, the Dragon's purpose is to torment Christians: ***“So the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”***

In this case the dragon, frustrated by his inability to destroy the Jews who took flight into the wilderness, sets out to make war on the saints. As we saw in **chapter 13** Satan accomplishes this by sending both the Antichrist and false prophet to persecute the saints.

The impact of this persecution is found in **Revelation 14:1-5** when we see the lamb with the 144,000 dressed in white. The placement of this vision after the account of the slaughter of the saints may lead us to conclude that they did not physically survive the persecution of the dragon. Thus, the only bastion of believers left would be those who took flight into the wilderness (**Rev. 12:14**). If this is true, it could be that the Dragon attempts to persecute the woman once again, this time using his satanic emissaries to lure these armies to Israel.

Thought Question: Why will the Jews be targets of such hatred?

- ii. **The Recruitment of the Kings (vs. 13-14)** Satan uses rather unconventional means to recruit for this final military conquest. From the mouths of the Dragon, Antichrist, and False Prophet come three frog-like creatures who persuade the whole world to come to Israel.

“The Mouth”: This speaks of the origin of these deceivers as well as their method. They will say anything to get the rest of the kings to come to Israel. Slick propaganda, inspiring speeches, threats, lies, and flatteries will all be utilized to lure the armies to the plain of Megiddo.

“Unclean Spirits”: These creatures are demons – fallen angels who carry out Satan's bidding.

“Frogs”: One of the Egyptian plagues as well as a forbidden food for a law-keeping Jew. The fact that many viewed these amphibians as foul and loathsome creatures

sheds light into the true nature of these demonic messengers. Despite their smooth-talking facade, these individuals are rotten to the core.

“For they are spirits of demons performing signs”: The dragon imbues these messengers with the power to perform supernatural signs. No doubt, the miracles manifested at the hands of these demons will dupe many into accepting their message.

Thought Question: How do these characteristics (smooth speech and miraculous signs) disguise the frog-like nature of these false teachers, as well as those in our own day and age?

These demons of deception go throughout the whole world mustering the kings and their armies for battle. The word for “battle” would be better translated “war”, as this will be a protracted military campaign which will conclude with a final assault on God Almighty.

- iii. **Hope for Believers (vs. 15)** No doubt, the sight of a gathering army will evoke fear in the hearts of many. Much like the Israelites sandwiched between the Red Sea and the Egyptian hoards, these Israelites find themselves in a desperate situation. In spite of all of God’s past faithfulness, and assurance of future victory, they still need some timely words of encouragement.

“Behold, I am coming like a thief”: This speaks of the imminent and unexpected return of Christ. At any point in time Christ will come back and decisively turn the battle. Those unprepared for His arrival will be both startled and terrified.

“Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame.” In contrast to those startled by the thief, blessings are promised to those who anticipate His arrival. The Christian who watches for Christ’s coming and dresses himself with the clothes of Christ’s righteousness—which hide his sin—will welcome Christ’s return to earth with gladness.

Thought Question: Does this promise hold any merit for us in this day and age? (cf. *Rev. 3:3*)

- iv. **The Mustering at Har-Magedon (vs. 16)** With the passing of the parenthetical note, God reveals the destination of the armies of the world: Har-Magedon.
- h. **The Seventh Bowl Judgment (16:17-21)** It should be noted that this is only a brief synopsis of the seventh bowl judgment, as the detailed description extends all the way until 22:5.
 - i. **The Declaration (vs. 17)** The seventh angel pours his bowl upon the air, signifying the wide scope of this judgment. Previous bowls were limited to the earth (16:2), the sea (16:3), the fresh waters (16:4), and the sun (16:8). This bowl expands the scope of judgment, as it will impact everyone who requires air to breathe.

Reminiscent of Christ’s triumphant cry on Calvary ***“It is finished,”*** the voice of the Almighty heralds ***“It is done.”*** In other words, the final furious dose of God’s wrath has been discharged.

Thought Question: Why will this be such a triumphant moment for God?

- ii. **The Great Earthquake (vs. 18-20)** An ominous storm emerges, from which the wrath of God will be poured out. The thick clouds and the peals of thunder hearken back to the storm at Mount Sinai in which God descended to give Moses the Ten Commandments. This time, God manifests His righteousness in the form of retribution.

Thought Question: What does the storm theophany (manifestation of God) reveal about God’s character?

Accompanying the arrival of the storm is a fantastic earthquake, the likes of which have never been seen before. Every magnificent city among the nations crumbles as the earth quakes, save one—the great city. In this case the great city refers to Jerusalem. There are several factors which lead to this conclusion. First of all, the “great city” is distinguished from the cities of the gentiles.⁴³ Secondly, the changed topography of the great earthquake accords with *Zechariah 14:4*:

“In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south.”

After mentioning the cities of the gentiles and Jerusalem, John discloses the fate of Babylon. This capital of the evil empire incurs the fierce wrath of God. Babylon’s fate will be chronicled in greater detail in *Revelation 17 and 18*.

Another result of the earthquake will be the leveling of the earth. Mountains will be brought down and islands will sink. This radical reshaping of the earth hints at God’s impending recreation.

Thought Question: How has the physical earth been impacted by the Fall?

- iii. **The Hail Storm (vs. 21)** Finally, hundred-pound hailstones begin to bombard the earth. The supernatural size of these hailstones makes obvious to the world who is behind this plague. Thus, the afflicted survivors bitterly blaspheme God.

⁴³ *The cities of the nations* can also be translated *the cities of the gentiles*.