

CHAPTER 15

Chapters 15 and 16 contain the vision of the seven vials of wrath. Chapter 15 is an introduction to the vision, and chapter 16 reveals the things actually contained in the seven vials. This is definitely one of the most difficult sections in Revelation. Many attempts have been made to find the proper interpretation of this vision, but few are logical and in agreement with the teachings of the New Testament. Although much difficulty lies in these chapters, we believe it is possible to understand many of the lessons contained therein. We will interpret this vision by following the same parallel method as has been used throughout the book. This interpretation will be based upon the belief that Revelation is written to, and for, all Christians living throughout the entire Christian dispensation. The meaning of these symbols will be applied to events which take place all during the Christian age, remembering that we are not speaking of specific events which may be dated, but general events which may occur over and over throughout the Christian age.

In this vision, John views seven angels holding seven golden vials containing the wrath of God (v. 7). God instructs these angels to pour out their vials of wrath upon seven different items, which symbolically represent those forces that oppose God. They are as follow:

- 1st vial - earth (16:2)
- 2nd vial - sea (16:3)
- 3rd vial - rivers and fountains of waters (16:4-7)
- 4th vial - sun (16:8,9)
- 5th vial - seat of the beast (16:10,11)
- 6th vial - river Euphrates (16:12-16)
- 7th vial - into the air (16:17-21)

Many commentators seek to find the meaning of these vials of wrath by comparing them with the ten plagues that God sent upon Egypt through the hand of Moses. Obviously, there must be a connection, but we would be mistaken to believe that their meanings are identical. The similarity or connection between these seven last plagues in Revelation and the ten plagues of Moses is that the ten plagues of Moses are a type or likeness to the seven last plagues. The ten plagues were physical plagues which affected the people of Egypt who held God's people in bondage, but the seven last plagues are spiritual plagues which affect those people who oppose God today! This kind of interpretation must be reasonable because many things in the Old Testament are a likeness, or shadow, of things that appear in the New Testament. Heb. 10:1 says, "For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things." Therefore, the law of Moses was a shadow or likeness of the new law which was to come through Christ. This is the concept we need to use in determining how the seven last plagues relate to the ten plagues of Moses.

As this chapter is studied, careful attention must be paid to the interpretation of 11:6 because in it is contained the ideas upon which this entire interpretation of the seven last plagues is based. Speaking of the "two witnesses," which represent Christians, 11:6 says, "These have power.., to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they will." Christians have the power to smite the earth with plagues. This idea is once again brought out in verse 6. When God made righteousness and the truth of the gospel available to mankind, represented by the "white linen" and "golden girdles," the effects of these plagues were set in order by God as he commanded the angels to pour them out upon the earth. When Christians preach the gospel today, they are smiting the earth (sinners) with these plagues. (For more discussion of this concept, see v. 6.)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SEVEN PLAGUES

Verse 1. And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvellous, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is filled up the wrath of God.

As the vision begins, John sees seven angels holding the seven last plagues, which contain the wrath of God. These are the “last” plagues because we are in the “last” times. We are in the “last time” (1 Jn. 2:18). Therefore, this Christian dispensation will bring to a close all of man’s activities on this earth. There will be no future laws or “times” set up by Christ. There will be no thousand-year period of time on this earth after Christ’s second coming when he will establish another law for his people to follow. We are serving Christ under the final law that will be given. This Christian age is the “last time,” and these “last plagues” take place during this Christian dispensation. They affect those people who oppose God or are unfaithful to him during this time.

Verse 2. And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire: and them that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass, having the harps of God.

After John saw the seven angels with the seven last plagues, he then observed people standing on a sea of glass mingled with fire. These people had gotten the victory over the beast, his image, and his mark. This is a reference to the symbols used in chapter 13, which describe powers that oppose God and persecute his people. (For a full understanding of these symbols, chapter 13 must be studied.) Rev. 13:8 says that everyone would worship this beast “whose names are not written in the book of life.” Therefore, those who do not worship the beast are those whose names are written in the book of life---Christians. This, in turn, means that the people standing on this fiery sea, who had gotten the victory over the beast, are Christians.

The place where these Christians were standing is described as a “sea of glass mingled with fire.” In 4:6, there is a description of God’s throne with a “sea of glass” before it. To stand before God’s throne would symbolically mean we are in a covenant relationship with him. (See 7:15.) But this sea of glass is mingled with fire. “Fire” is used symbolically to represent the many trials and tribulations a Christian must suffer as he strives to live a Christian life. Therefore, the lesson being taught is that it is not easy to be a Christian. One must constantly endure the trials of this life if he is to stand before God’s throne as a Christian. Acts 14:22 says, “We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.”

These people had gotten the “victory” over the beast. This again defines these people as Christians. According to 13:8, those who do not worship the beast have their names written in the book of life because of their obedience to God’s will. In 1 Jn. 5:4, we read, “For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world.” When we are obedient to God’s law and are baptized into Christ, we overcome this world of sin; we overcome the beast and his image; we have our names written in the book of life; we stand justified before the throne of God; yet, there are many trials and tribulations that we must endure.

These Christians standing on the fiery sea have the “harps of God.” The interpretation of these harps is identical to 14:1, 2 which pictures the 144,000 standing on Mt. Sion where they are called “harpers” harping with their harps. The 144,000 figuratively represent all of God’s people, and, according to 14:3, they were singing. The same is true in this passage. Those people standing on the fiery sea represent all those who are obedient to God’s law. They are pictured as having the harps of God which represent their voices because in verse 3, they sing.

Many people try to use verse 2 to prove instrumental music is an acceptable form of worship to God. In the comments on 14:2, reasons are given why these “harps” do not sanction the use of instruments of music in worship. (If you are interested in this subject, refer to those comments.)

Verse 3. And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; Just and true are thy

ways, thou King of saints.

God's people sing praises to him because he has provided a way in which man may receive forgiveness of his sins. Man obtains forgiveness by being obedient to the law that God has given him to follow. Before Christ came the first time, the law of Moses was in effect for the Jewish nation. When Christ died on the cross, those who had lived under that law and been obedient to it had their sins forgiven (Heb. 9:15). We now live under the law of Christ, and, if we are obedient to it, we have immediate forgiveness of our sins. This is why the people of God are singing the song of Moses and the Lamb. These laws provide forgiveness for man's sins and make it possible for us to live with God in heaven for an eternity. The law of Christ now provides a way for us to have victory over the beast, his mark, and the number of his name, and we must give God praise for this.

Furthermore, these laws of God are declared to be "great and marvellous works." They are also referred to as "just and true" ways. To sing the song of the Lamb indicates that we belong to him and follow in his ways. Therefore, this song should be the attitude of all Christians today.

Verse 4. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest.

The song that all Christians sing continues by declaring that God only is holy and that all people should worship him. This, obviously, should be the attitude of all people today who seek to follow God and call themselves Christians.

Also emphasized in verse 4 is the fact that God's judgments are made known. Therefore, all nations must worship him. Another verse that uses similar language and should be studied along with this verse is 14:7. These verses describe the situation of the world today pertaining to man's worship to God. All nations or all people are responsible to be obedient to the gospel. This is in contrast to the situation in the Old Testament when only the descendants of the twelve children of Israel were responsible to be obedient to the law of Moses. The law of Moses was given to only one nation, Israel, but today the gospel is for all men. In Jn. 12:48b, Jesus says, "The word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day." God's judgment has already been made known to man. We will be judged by the gospel of Christ, the written word of the New Testament. If we are obedient to it, we will receive our reward in heaven. If we are not, we will be cast into outer darkness. Therefore, the purpose of the song Christians sing in this vision is to show that in order to be obedient to God, we must follow the instructions he has given in his Word. God's followers between the time of Moses and Christ were under the law of Moses. They sang the song of Moses. When Christ came, all nations were put under one law, the gospel. Today, we sing the song of the Lamb. All people of all nations must obey the gospel because it is the judgment of God!

Verse 5. And after that I looked, and, behold, the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony In heaven was opened:

The scene changes with this verse. After John saw Christians standing on the sea of glass mingled with fire, he looked and saw the temple of the tabernacle in heaven opened. The temple of the tabernacle is a likeness to the ancient tabernacle, which the children of Israel carried with them in the wilderness. According to Ex. 25:8,9, this was where God dwelt among his people. This tabernacle of the testimony in heaven is the dwelling place of God in heaven. This is designed to show that these plagues which we are about to see come directly from God.

Another reason we know this "temple of the tabernacle of the testimony" refers to God's dwelling place in heaven is because of 11:19. There, the temple of God was opened in heaven and the "ark of his testament" was seen. This took place in the time of the seventh trumpet, which is the time of judgment. (See comments on 11:18,19.) According to 15:8, no man will be able to enter this temple until the seven plagues of God are fulfilled. This again shows that these seven last plagues take place during this Christian dispensation because this is the last time before judgment.

Verse 6. And seven angels came out of the temple, having the seven plagues, clothed in pure and white linen, and having their breasts girded with golden girdles.

These angels were introduced in verse 1 and are pictured as coming out of the temple of God. This indicates that these seven plagues came directly from God and are under his control.

These angels were clothed in pure white linen. In 19:8, white linen is defined as the “righteousness of saints.” According to 11:6, the witnesses of God, or Christians, have the power “to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they will.” (See comments on 11:3-6.) We do not say that these angels represent Christians, but they do bring the plagues from God which Christians have the ability to use to smite the earth. The only thing Christians possess today which they can use to smite the earth is the Word of God. That is what comes directly from God out of the tabernacle of the testimony. The obvious question that arises is this: How can the Word of God be a plague? It is a plague to those who disregard its teachings and are not willing to accept or even hear it. If one is living in the pleasures of sin, with no intention or desire to turn from that type of life, he surely will not want to hear a message which says his end will be eternal destruction. It becomes a plague to him. Therefore, as Christians go forth in the world today preaching the Word of God, they are smiting those who are unwilling to obey the gospel with all types of plagues.

The angels also have their breasts girded with golden girdles. Eph. 6:14 contains symbolic language as it admonishes Christians to “stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth.” Also, in the description of Jesus in 1:13, he is wearing a golden girdle. The golden girdles that the angels are wearing stand for the truth. The truth comes from God, and Christians must be girded with that truth at all times. This is how the seven plagues of God are poured out upon the earth--- by Christians who teach God’s Word.

Verse 7. And one of the four beasts gave unto the seven angels seven golden vials full of the wrath of God, who liveth for ever and ever.

These golden vials are given to the seven angels by one of the four beasts. This is a reference to the four living creatures described in 4:6-8. These four living creatures were also responsible for introducing each of the first four seals of chapter 6. There may be no special significance in the fact that the beast (living creature) handed the angels the vials of wrath, but it is noteworthy that this agrees with the overall interpretation of the seals, the trumpets, and the plagues. In chapter 6, the living creatures introduced the first four seals, which represent physical events that take place on this earth. The vision of the seven vials of wrath deals with spiritual matters which affect man, but these spiritual matters also have an effect on the physical lives of those who oppose God. Since they deal with physical matters, the four living creatures present them to the angels. There may be no way of knowing exactly why the living creature hands the angels the vials of wrath. Therefore, we simply offer this explanation for further study.

One thing that is clear is that these vials contain the “wrath” of God. For anyone to teach today that God will not punish those who are unrighteous is absurd. It is an attempt to evade the plain teachings of the Bible. Those who do not obey the gospel will be punished with “everlasting destruction” (2 Thess. 1:8, 9). Let us believe what the Bible says!

Verse 8. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God, and from his power, and no man was able to enter into the temple, till the seven plagues of the seven angels were fulfilled.

The temple of God is filled with smoke from his glory and power. Smoke is used to show the complete glory and power of God. If smoke is allowed to enter a room, it completely fills that room; there is no place to stand without being surrounded by it. The same is true with the glory and power of God. It is complete. No place exists outside the power and glory of God. He created all things and is in complete control of all things.

No one will be capable of entering into the final dwelling place of God until all plagues have

been fulfilled or all things of this earth have ended. Verse 8 identifies the time frame of the seven last plagues. They are to take place before God will allow anyone to enter into that heavenly abode. Then these plagues must take place during this present Christian age. They will affect man until the time of judgment when God will take his children home to live with him eternally. (For an Old Testament likeness of this symbolism, see Ex. 40:34,35.)

As we study the seven plagues in chapter 16, it will become evident that there is a distinct 4-3 division of these plagues just as there is in the visions of the seals and the trumpets. The first four deal with the effects these spiritual plagues have directly on men as the gospel is proclaimed today. The last three show how God will deal with the unrighteous. The last of these, the seventh plague, specifically describes the sinner's eternal destruction in hell.