

LECTURES ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION

By

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE VIALS OF THE WRATH OF GOD

(Lectures 15 and 16)

IT is my purpose this evening to go briefly over chapters 15 and 16, as these form one connected vision, depicting the final scenes of the dispensation of judgment which has been so largely occupying us in these addresses.

We need to remember that the Revelation is primarily a book of judgment, and, while it may seem very pessimistic to be occupied with so many fearful scenes, all is bright at the end. The book does not close until the new heavens and new earth are brought in, wherein righteousness shall dwell throughout a blissful eternity. I need not apologize therefore for bringing so continually before you picture after picture of God's judicial dealings with the prophetic earth. He has given us these revelations out of kindness to us, that we may be warned thereby to avoid what lies ahead of this guilty world, and to shun every form of the apostasy which He is so soon coming to judge.

The seven vials (more properly, bowls) of the wrath of God, with which the 16th chapter deals, are all included in the judgments of the last half of the Great Tribulation. They show the intensive character that these judgments will take as the end draws on. I do not like to speak positively where I have no definite word of Scripture to guide, but it seems to me the series covers but a very brief period at the close of the last half of the week, thus setting forth the judgments that will fall upon the kingdom of the Beast and the sphere of the Antichrist's special sway, at the very end of the Great Tribulation.

In our last address we noticed that there was one particular company of saints in heaven who responded in a very noticeable manner to the 144,000 Israelites standing on Mt. Sion. In the 15th chapter the scene is changed. The prophet sees what is going on in heaven, and this company at once comes before his vision. He says,

“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. 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 the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass, having the harps of God. 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” (vers. 1-3).

This redeemed company standing on the sea of glass, having the harps of God, is not to be confounded with the church of the present dispensation. We are told that they sing the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb. Clearly then, they are Israelites. They are singing the song of Moses, which is the celebration of The Lord’s victory over Israel’s foes, and the song of the Lamb, which is the song of redemption.

They are those who have been slain by the servants of the last great apostate power, but who have been raised from the dead, and raptured during the tribulation period. They are, perhaps, identical with the two witnesses of chapter 11, though I do not press this. But they are at least like them in these particulars, they have been faithful witnesses on earth, and, because of their witness-bearing, have been put to death. They are seen as raised from the dead and caught up to God and to His throne. Like the elders, they have in their hands the harps of God, and are a worshipping company.

These are said to stand upon the sea of glass, which is here represented as mingled with fire. The sea of glass, as pointed out in a previous lecture, answers to the brazen sea in Solomon’s temple, and the brazen laver in the court of the tabernacle. It is the type of the Word of God, needed for cleansing here; in heaven, crystallized, a glassy sea. upon which the glorified saints take their stand to praise Him who has redeemed them to Himself, and made them forever clean. The glass is seen here as mingled with fire, because of the fiery trial through which these martyrs have passed.

These glorified witnesses to His saving power praise and adore Him for His justice and truth, recognizing the righteousness of His ways, and the holiness of His person. Because of this, all nations shall come and worship before Him in the day that His judgments are made manifest. Observe, it is not the grace of God that will thus bring the nations to own His authority and worship before Him; it is **“when his judgments are in the earth that the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.”**

Scripture nowhere teaches the conversion of the world through the preaching of the gospel in this dispensation. The world will, eventually, be converted, but it will only be after the unbelieving portion has been purged out by judgment, and the remnant left for the kingdom will give glory to the God of heaven.

In the 5th verse we have another of the “openings” of this marvelous book.

We read, **“And after that I looked, and, behold, the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was opened.”**

The mention of the tabernacle of the testimony brings Israel again before us, and reminds us that these judgments are in order to the carrying out of God's covenant with His ancient people Israel, when the nations that have oppressed them must be punished.

“Jerusalem is a burdensome stone for all people: all that burden themselves with it shall be cut in pieces, though all the people of the earth be gathered together against it” (Zechariah 12:3).

Therefore the nations who have vented their hatred upon Israel cannot escape the wrath of God.

The temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven being opened, John tells us,

“The 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. And one of the four beasts (or, living ones) gave unto the seven angels seven golden vials full of the wrath of God, who liveth for ever and ever. 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” (vers. 6-8).

These seven angels are to complete the wrath of God. They introduce and close His final visitations in judgment upon the Gentiles.

Then will be fulfilled the many prophecies of retribution with which Scripture abounds.

“It is a righteous thing,” says the apostle Paul, **“to recompense tribulation to those who trouble you.”**

If this could be said in regard to saints of the church period, how much more in regard to Israel. Many people have been troubled with what are called the Imprecatory Psalms. They cannot understand David calling down the judgment of God upon His enemies, or, what amounts to the same thing, Israel's prayer for the overthrow and destruction of all their foes. But, in the righteous government of God, it must be that those nations that have oppressed and sought the destruction of His people shall themselves be visited with the fierceness of His wrath.

Joseph Cook tells how on one occasion a gentleman, in conversation with a minister of the gospel, was objecting to the Imprecatory Psalms because they did not seem to him to be in harmony with the spirit of Christianity. It was just at the beginning of the Civil War. As they talked together a newspaper was brought in, and the minister read, “The Federal Army is marching upon Richmond.” “Good,” exclaimed the other: “I hope they will destroy it.” “That,” cried the preacher, “is an imprecatory psalm.” The point is that it is thoroughly in keeping with God's mind to desire the triumph of righteousness and the overthrow of what is iniquitous.

God's glory is at stake; His righteousness demands the punishment of iniquity, both in this world and in that which is to come. He does not apologize for dealing thus with unrighteousness, nor do His servants need to apologize for Him.

Verse 8 indicates that when the seven angels are about to come forth to execute their awful mission, it will be one of intense concern in heaven. The temple is seen filled with smoke from the glory of God, and from His power, and man, though redeemed, is represented as standing without, in awe, awaiting developments.

Then a great voice out of the temple is heard saying to the seven angels, **“Go your ways, and pour out (or, empty) the bowls of the wrath of God upon the earth”** (chap. 16:1).

As in the case of the seven trumpets, and, in measure, of the seven seals, I do not profess to be able to tell you just how much we are to take as symbolic, and how much as literal, in this septenary series of judgments. We know that the book of Revelation is a book of symbols, and yet there may be a great deal more in it that is literal than many of us suppose. The literal judgments may be intimately linked with the symbolical.

No one reading this chapter carefully can fail to observe how intimately the bowls of wrath are linked, in their results upon the earth, with the plagues that fell upon Egypt preparatory to Israel’s deliverance. God is again about to deliver His people, and this for the last time. The outpouring of these bowls depict, in large measure, the woes that were visited upon the kingdom of Pharaoh. But, as above remarked, descriptions perhaps must be taken symbolically rather than literally; or, perhaps, both interpretations coalesce.

In verse 2 we read, **“And the first went, and poured out his vial upon the earth; and there fell a noisome and grievous sore upon the men which had the mark of the Beast. and upon them which worshiped his image.”**

This answers to the plague in Egypt, where God smote man and beast with boils and blains. It perhaps symbolizes a spiritual plague, which will cause those who have received the mark of the Beast and worship his image, as great annoyance as the physical suffering that would follow such a noisome and grievous sore upon the bodies of men. Notice that the sphere of this plague is the earth; and it answers to the first trumpet of chapter 8. But it is very evident that, while the sphere is the same, the judgment is more intense.

In the same way the second angel’s bowl links with the second angel’s trumpet, which affected the sea. But again we have greater intensity, for, in verse 3. we read, **“And the second angel poured out his bowl upon the sea; and it became as the blood of a dead man: and every living soul died in the sea.”**

What a scene of death and desolation, whether we think of it as physical or spiritual, or both. **“All they that hate me,”** says Wisdom in the book of Proverbs, **“love death.”** And so death is the portion for those who have refused the life that is in Christ Jesus.

The third angel’s trumpet affected the rivers and fountains of waters, and in verse 4 we read, **“The third angel poured out his bowl upon the rivers and fountains of waters: and they became blood.”**

Thus the very sources of life are destroyed, as in the plague that fell upon Egypt when the river itself became blood. In verses 5-7, God's righteousness, in thus dealing with those who had slaughtered His servants, is fully attested: **"And I heard the angel of the waters say, Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be, because Thou hast judged thus. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and Thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy. And I heard another out of the altar say, Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments."**

Every right-thinking person will add his "Amen," for God is righteous in all His ways, whether in grace or in judgment.

The fourth angel's bowl is poured out upon the sun, even as at the sounding of the fourth trumpet the third part of the sun was smitten. But again we have greater intensity in the judgment than in the trumpet series, for **"Power was given unto him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, which hath power over these plagues: and they repented not to give Him glory."**

The sun is the supreme source of light, and this implies that that which should have been for man's comfort becomes a curse instead, and the means of his bitter suffering. But, though their anguish is so great, men are not brought to repentance by punishment. God's name is blasphemed, and His creatures refuse to give Him glory. This is a solemn consideration for those who teach that punishment is really only chastisement, and is always corrective.

The next section intensifies this in a remarkable way. For, when the fifth angel empties his bowl upon the seat of the Beast, thus smiting the last great confederation at its center, filling his kingdom with darkness, we read that **"they gnawed their tongues for pain, and blasphemed the God of heaven, because of their pains and their sores, and repented not of their deeds."**

Darkness and anguish do not tend to soften men's hearts, or to lead them to confess their sins. Their very suffering but stirs them up to blaspheme God the more. And so, in the outer darkness of a lost eternity, our Lord has told us there shall not only be weeping and wailing because of suffering endured, but there will be the gnashing of teeth, which implies rage and indignation against God. With permanency of character he who rejects Christ is guilty of eternal sin, and eternal punishment necessarily follows.

At the sounding of the fifth angel's trumpet, we were told **"the bottomless pit was opened, and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit"** (chap. 9:2).

This, doubtless, explains the darkness that fills the kingdom of the Beast when the fifth angel's bowl of wrath is poured upon the seat of the Beast. It is judicial darkness brought about by demoniacal delusions.

We now come to a portion which has been very much before people in these past years of bloody warfare. Again and again the question has been raised whether this great world-war is the Armageddon conflict predicted in the Bible.

Teachers instructed by the Word have invariably assured anxious questioners that, while this war may be arranging the stage, if one may so speak, for Armageddon, it cannot be that great conflict itself. Armageddon is a definite locality in the land of Palestine. The word means “**the mountain of Megiddo**,” and it refers to the mountain that overlooks the valley of Esdraelon - the great plain of Jezreel in the northern part of the land of Palestine, which Napoleon Bonaparte said would make an ideal battleground for all the armies of the world. There, the last great battle is to be fought, just before the appearing of the Lord in glory. And this the sixth angel’s bowl introduces:

“And the sixth angel poured out his vial upon the great river Euphrates; and the water thereof was dried up, that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared. And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. For they are the spirits of devils (or, demons), working miracles, which go forth unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty. Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame. And he gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon” (16:12-16).

The great river Euphrates was formerly the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire and later of the Turkish dominion, and it speaks, I believe, of the destruction of that power. Luther said, “When the Turk is driven out of Europe, then comes the day of judgment.” And, in a certain sense, this will undoubtedly be true - not the day of judgment for the wicked dead, but the day of judgment for the living nations.

The Turk is an intruder in Europe, the enemy of both God and man; but I am convinced that his hold upon Constantinople and surrounding country is very nearly ended. God will drive the Ottoman Empire from Europe, * and punish that nation which has so well deserved the name of “The unspeakable Turk.”

** Since the above was written the Ottoman Empire has fallen and the Angora Republic taken its place.*

The cry of martyred Armenia, and of other peoples who have suffered so fearfully from these Asiatic hordes, will be answered by the destruction of the nation that wrought such havoc. It is very evident, I think, that God is already beginning to bring this to pass.

If you have a map of Europe of one hundred years ago, notice the place that the Turkish Empire then had, and compare it with a map of the present day, and see how much of its territory has been wrested from it.

Turkey, long known as “the sick man of Europe,” is sicker than ever now, and hanging on with the clutch of despair to one little corner of Europe; and I am convinced that it will not be long before he is driven out altogether. Then, according to the book of Daniel, he will “**pitch his tent between the seas in the glorious holy mountain; yet he shall come to his end, and none shall help him.**”

Driven into Asia Minor, he will finally, I take it, attempt to establish himself in the land of Palestine. And this will arouse, not only the European powers in the league of the ten kingdoms, but it will stir up the eastern and northern nations besides. Turkey will, if I understand the prophetic scheme aright, be backed in the last days by Russia and, possibly Germany too, in opposition to the Western Confederation. Both these Great Powers will be anxious to hold the land of Palestine, which is admittedly the key to the so-called Eastern Question. But the activity of these European nations will arouse the races of the Far East, for, when the Euphrates is dried up, we are told it is **“that the way of the kings of the East might be prepared.”**

Who are the kings of the East? Various theories have been suggested. Some consider they may be the so-called lost ten tribes of Israel, returning to their land. Others, the dominions of Persia, Afghanistan, and so on. It is significant that the word rendered **“the east”** is really *“the sun-rising.”* Is it only a coincidence that, for a millennium at least, Japan has been known as *“the kingdom of the rising sun”*? May not the Mongolian races, possibly allied with India, be the kings of the East, here depicted as coming in conflict with the powers of the West?

Thus the whole world will be thrown into bloody warfare, and all nations be gathered together against Jerusalem to battle. This great world-conflict will be the direct result of the working of demons, for we are told that three unclean frog-like spirits came out of the mouths of the dragon, the Beast, and the false prophet - demons working miracles, visiting the kingdoms of the earth (that is, the prophetic earth), and of the whole world (that is, the nations outside the prophetic earth), to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty. This will be the great and final Armageddon conflict - the place where they will meet one another in an attempt to settle the final issues.

Notice that there is a parenthesis, however, in verse 15, which comes in just before the close of this section, and thus preceding the seventh bowl. It is the voice of the Lord Himself, **“Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame.”**

The time of His manifestation is very close. He would have those who look for His appearing watching, and keeping their garments undefiled, lest they be put to shame before the ungodly. The undefiled are those who keep themselves from all fellowship with the Satan-inspired movements of the last days, walking with God in holy separation from the abounding iniquity, as directed by His Word. The voice is for us as well as for the saints in a future day. The seventh angel’s bowl is poured out into the air, and, we are told,

“There came a great voice out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, It is done. And there were voices, and thunders, and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake, such as was not since men were upon the earth, so mighty an earthquake, and so great. And the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell: and great Babylon came in remembrance before God, to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath. And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. And there fell upon men a great hail out of heaven, every stone about the weight of a talent: and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail; for the plague thereof was exceeding great” (vers. 17-21).

This indicates the utter destruction of every spiritual and religious institution that man has built up apart from God. It is the absolute overthrow of civilization, and the complete wreck of all man's hopes to bring in even livable conditions in this world, while rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ. The scene is one of anarchy and confusion, but, despite the signs of divine wrath resting on the souls of men, they still blaspheme God, and give no sign of repentance.

Time forbids taking up great Babylon's judgment to-night. It will, however, come before us in our next address.

In closing, let me remind you that the Church of God is to be caught up ere these scenes take place upon the earth. We are looking for the Lord Jesus Christ, who is our Saviour from the coming wrath. Do you know Him? If not, I plead with you in the light of all we have had before us, "**Flee from the wrath to come.**"

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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