

BOOK OF REVELATION

Lesson 34 - Chapter 16

Revelation chapter 16 is highly emotional, drenched in drama, and utterly terrifying in its prophecy of what lies ahead. It speaks primarily in terms of the 7 so-called Bowl Judgments being poured out on the earth, aimed mostly at rebellious and unrepentant mankind. In order for us to make better sense of Revelation chapter 16 and forward, we're going to take a couple of detours today.

The first verse of the previous chapter (chapter 15) began like this:

^{CJB} **Revelation 15:1** *Then I saw another sign in heaven, a great and wonderful one- seven angels with the seven plagues that are the final ones; because with them, God's fury is finished.*

So plainly this group of 7 judgments announced in chapter 15 and carried out in chapter 16 are the final ones and no more will happen in all of history. God's wrath will have been poured out, to its fullest. Mankind will have been permanently divided and separated into two groups: Believers and non-Believers. Both groups have had their eternal fate sealed (no further change is possible): the former group to a pleasurable eternity with God, and the latter group to eternal torment.

So to this point 21 named judgments have been pronounced and by the end of chapter 16, all will have been fulfilled. The first 7 were called the Seal Judgments, the next group of 7 were called the Trumpet Judgments, and this final group of 7 named the Bowl Judgments. Might there be a reason for exactly 21 judgments? Or does this correlate in any way with a biblical pattern? For those who have attended the Seed of Abraham Fellowship annual Sukkot Fellowship, you have heard me speak about this correlation. So for the rest of you, I'll briefly explain.

The God-ordained Biblical Feast of Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles) is the 7th and final one of the yearly cycle of 7 Biblical Feasts as given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. We have learned the significance, especially in Revelation, of the number 7 and that symbolically it means divine fullness, wholeness and perfection, but it also indicates finality. So Sukkot was the culmination of all the Biblical Feasts, the one that was perhaps the most anticipated by both the priests and the lay people of Israel. And during that feast, which lasted for 7 days, the most awesome part of the daily Sukkot ritual was the water libation ceremony. On the surface the meaning of this ritual is straightforward; recall that most of the Biblical Feasts are agricultural-based, and that Sukkot occurs at the FINAL harvest of the season (the final ingathering of the grain) before the fields go fallow for a time. So the water libation ceremony is connected with the plea to Yehoveh for the vital rain that will make or break the output of the next crop in the spring.

In general it operated like this: the High Priest would take a special golden pitcher, go outside the city walls of Jerusalem and down the hill, below the City of David, to the Pool of Siloam where he would fill it with about a quart of water. Next the High Priest would walk up a long series of steps and in holy procession enter the Temple grounds through a special gate (called the Water Gate) built into the thick limestone walls that protected and surrounded the Holy City.

The High Priest would linger at the Water Gate until some Levite musicians blew 3 loud trumpet blasts and then he proceeded up the stairs to the Great Altar of Burnt Offerings. In front of the overflowing crowds the High Priest poured the water out while saying in a loud voice: **“Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation”**, which is a passage taken from Isaiah 12:3. Levite musicians played music and then the crowd would recite one of the Hallel portions, specifically Psalm 118:25: **“Save now, I pray, O Lord; O Lord, I pray, send now prosperity”**. This song was called the Hosanna (Hoshannah).

The last day of the Feast of Tabernacles was the grand finale; it was even given a special name: **Hoshanna Rabbah**. On that last day all the rituals were even more grand and the people even more excited and expectant. On all other days of Sukkot the High Priest strode through the Water Gate with his golden vessel full of living water; his signal to proceed through the gate was the sound of 3 trumpet blasts. But on the final day of Sukkot the Levites blew 7 trumpet blasts, and then repeated it 3 times, for a total of 21 trumpet blasts.

After entering the Water Gate the High Priest then solemnly proceeded up the several steps to the Altar and waited until the crowd quieted and gave him all their attention. Then with the whole area silenced, and every eye riveted upon him, the High Priest lifted that golden pitcher and poured out its contents for the last time.....not to be done again until the next year's Feast of Tabernacles. Note the "pouring out" of the water from a vessel, just as we have the final 7 judgments being "poured out" from vessels (bowls) only instead of being filled with joy these final vessels in Revelation 16 are filled with God's fury.

We have here an unmistakable connection: Revelation reveals that 3 sets of judgments will be poured out on the earth and each of the 3 sets will consist of 7 separate acts of divine judgment (just as the High Priest waited for 3 sets of 7 trumpet blasts before he proceeded). Revelation names these judgments the seal, trumpet and bowl judgments and altogether there are 21 of them. This is the identical pattern and format as the blowing of the trumpets at the water libation ceremony that brings the 7th and final Biblical Feast (Sukkot) to a close, which is a shadow of these 21 judgments (and especially the final 7) that will usher in the close of the present age and the entry into the era of the Millennial Kingdom of Messiah.

For those who might not know about the 7 Biblical Feasts, I strongly recommend that you study about them because at their core they are prophetic of the redemptive work of Messiah and the stages of development of God's Kingdom.

Let's re-read Revelation 16 and I'll have a few more things to say of a general nature before we get back into the Scripture passages.

RE-READ REVELATION CHAPTER 16 all

It is important that we are aware of the use of angels in carrying out God's Bowl Judgments. The Scriptures don't tell us very much about angels; mostly we merely find them doing assignments that God has given to them but nowhere do we find much about their characteristics, societal hierarchy, capabilities and limitations, or their substance, which we can only describe as "spirit". Angels are presented in a matter of fact way with little fanfare, as though their existence and their spheres of influence are common knowledge... but with nearly no detail. So it is not surprising that the Hebrew Sages and later Rabbis developed a lot of traditions about angels, and much of it had already been developed by John's time. Were his visions and how he describes and understands those visions about angels and the structure of nature taken within the context of the branch of Judaism that he was familiar with? Almost certainly because his life experiences, his culture, and his language formed the basis of how he interpreted not only the world around him but also the spiritual world. Therefore the visions he received he interpreted within that same backdrop. Even his belief in Yeshua as Messiah would have changed little about his understanding in these areas because Christ didn't speak to it.

John's circumstance is so very similar for us today even though we often don't realize it. Without a teacher to help understand how the Israelites of ancient Bible times understood Heaven, earth, sky, the universe and spiritual beings, etc., then we moderns right away begin to draw mental pictures based not on what the ancient biblical authors thought and meant, but rather our mental pictures are based upon our particular cultural norms and beliefs, our presumptions about how the earth and the cosmos work, and so on. And therefore our interpretation and understanding of what God's Word is telling us is based on our modern worldviews complete with modern technology.

So what we need to do to better understand what the Lord is telling us is to dig deep and learn about ancient Bible times and how the people of those days saw things. And what we know from John's 1st century era is that the Jews at that time generally believed that there were ministering angels if not for every Jewish individual (although some Jews believed that every Jew had his or her own guardian angel), then certainly there were angels assigned to every aspect of life and especially for the various elements of nature. It was not new information to John that God had angels in charge of the air, in charge of the oceans, in charge of the fresh water sources, in charge of rivers, in charge of the land, etc. So John was not at all startled or confused over God using the angels in charge of these various attributes of nature to carry out the several judgments that God ordained. Likely it would have confused him had God not done it that way.

But we also can't get around the reality that some of what John believed in this regard had pagan influence. Around 500 years before John, Empedocles, a Greek philosopher, created the theory of the 4 basic elements of nature. According to this theory, the physical (material) world is made up of four elements: earth, water, air, and fire. These elements cannot be deconstructed, and the various materials in the world are different from each other only in the relative amounts of the four elements which comprise them. The Greek philosopher Aristotle, who lived a couple of hundred years after Empedocles, embraced the theory of the four

elements and added a fifth one that he called "ether," the sacred element from which, he believed, the heavens were formed. This was basically cutting edge scientific theory for that era; however reality is that nature is much more complex than this, and this early Greek scientific theory of the 4 elements has proved to be incorrect on nearly every level.

With that information in hand, then when we look at the overall format of Revelation chapter 16 it is hard not to notice that God's judgment is set upon those same 4 elements of nature: earth, water, fire, and air. The 1st Bowl Judgment involved earth, the second, third and sixth judgments water, the fourth the sun (fire), and the 7th one air. The only one that doesn't specifically involve earth, water, fire or air is the 5th one that was aimed at Satan's kingdom. I'm hardly the first to perceive this; and I don't like ignoring those things in the Bible that usually bother Christian Pastors and commentators (so much that they prefer to gloss over them and move on), because there's always good reason for the way it is presented to us. And while those reasons that God revealed certain information to us may not always be highly spiritual in nature, they can be cultural and by leaving them as is help us to understand the mindset of the ancient writer of any particular Bible book.

Recall a couple of lessons ago that we discussed the Jewish mindset of John's era about how the earth, sky, and Heaven were structured. That is, the earth was flat with corners, there was a dome above earth where the birds flew and the sun, moon, and stars hung, and above that was highest Heaven where God lived. This of course is not scientifically accurate as we now know, but it is what John and most people of his time imagined from their limited vantage point. So when we read about mid-Heaven, and highest-Heaven, the firmament, and angels flying around and so forth this is the mental image that folks in Bible times held.

So in John's vision, God reveals His plans to John in ways he and those of his time can best grasp and identify with. Whereas it was the common belief in his day that all of nature consisted of earth, water, fire, and air then we see God declaring His judgments in those same terms since these are the final judgments and everything is being judged.

I won't repeat what we learned last week, but will briefly remind you that in chapter 16 regarding the 1st Bowl Judgment, God's target is the earth (meaning the land). But perhaps better, it is land creatures that is the point and the pertinent land creatures are human beings. Specifically it is a judgment upon humans that have accepted the mark of the Beast that, to God, signifies their loyalty is to Satan. And this judgment is disfiguring, painful sores that identifies that person as being an enemy of God. Further the skin sores is symbolic of the divinely wrought spiritual disease called **Tzara'at**, an ugly skin disease that exposes a person's inner spiritual condition before God by having that person wear it on his skin. A person with **Tzara'at** is highly unclean and full of shame. Might this include some Believers who give in, in hopes of survival, and rely on God's mercy to understand why they did what they did? Absolutely; because there is a warning back in chapter 14 that even in the midst of all the horror that is happening at the hand of the Anti-Christ, perseverance on the part of God's people is needed, and that we shouldn't worry because our death will be a welcomed and blessed event on account of our struggles finally being over. Thus if a Believer should think he or she can escape God's wrath by taking on the mark in order to escape the Beast's wrath, then think again. A person cannot have allegiance to both God and Satan. If a Believer is

essentially given the choice of taking the mark or death, then the Lord says that death is our only option.

The 2nd Bowl Judgment was poured out upon the salt waters of our planet. It turned the oceans into a goo that was like the coagulated blood of a dead person. This has both literal and symbolic meaning. Such a circumstance will of course make extinct every living organism in the oceans and cut the world's food supply to such a low level that billions will starve to death and the world's economy will sink. But it is also symbolic of God declaring the water ritually unclean as there is nothing of a higher degree of uncleanness than a dead body, and blood associated with the death of the guilty is also highly unclean.

The 3rd Bowl Judgment is announced in verse 4. It is also divine judgment on the element of water; only this time it is on fresh water.....the water that we drink. These waters, too, were turned to blood. Notice how this judgment resembles the plague of blood upon the water in Egypt at the time of the exodus. But also notice this: even though components of the Bowl Judgments are very similar to several of the Egyptian plagues, the Egyptian plagues were highly localized; the rest of the world went along its merry way as Egypt wilted under the hand of God. The Bowl Judgments, however, are universal; they are planet wide. There is nowhere to hide or escape from their effects. So the rich and the poor, the great and small, the political leaders and the average citizens of the world will all suffer together.

Verse 5 (still concerning the 3rd Bowl Judgment) begins with the words "Then I heard the angel of the waters say". Here is a fine example of what we discussed earlier; it is that the Jewish belief was that there were ministering angels over every aspect of nature. This seems to indicate that but one angel was assigned the task of overseeing the earth's waters. Is it true that an angel is in charge of the earth's water? Or is this merely something of a myth that John and other Jews believed? I don't know for certain but since there is nothing in the Bible that would dispute such a claim, I can find no reason to question it even though most modern Bible commentators accept this only as a figure of speech and not as a reality. However their reasoning is not based on Scriptural evidence; rather it is purely that they do not believe in angels, demons, miracles, or the spiritual world so they automatically assert that this passage reflects only primitive superstition.

Continuing verse 5 the angel of the waters makes a declaration that speaks of revenge and retribution. This is the principle of Lex Talionis at work: proportional justice. It is better known as eye-for-an-eye. That is, a person is to be subject to punishment or judgment measure-for-measure to his crime or sin. And here we're told that because "they" (meaning wicked people) poured out the blood of God's people and of His prophets, so then they will have to drink blood to survive (the blood-like waters). Christians (especially Evangelical Christians) take notice: most of your denominations have declared that this principle of proportional justice has been done away with in Christ (along with all other aspects of the Law). It was the mean, wrathful God of the Old Testament who demanded this; but the nice, merciful, loving God of the New Testament, Jesus, has replaced the Father and His ways with "turn the other cheek", and "love your enemies". Yet here we find in Revelation, which is the newest of the New Testament writings, that in the near future of modern times this fearful attribute and principle of God's justice system remains unchanged.

The first part of the angel of the waters' proclamation is to say that the Holy One (God) is the One who was and who is. Pay attention to the fact that yet again in Revelation where we might expect the phrase about God's nature to be "who was, who is, and who is to come", the "to come" part is missing. This is not a copyist error; rather it is explaining that the God that is to come, HAS come. And since this reference is invariably to God the Father, then we need to realize that from John's perspective, as concerns the End of Days, that the Father has indeed "come" in relation to the End Times timeline. This would not have been news to John because the Prophet Zechariah declared it in Zechariah 14.

I'm going to read this to you from the CJB, but I'm also going to add back in a word that actually appears in the original Hebrew texts that makes all the difference in its interpretation. In the CJB where we see the word Adonai, that is there strictly to uphold Jewish Rabbinical tradition. But the word that is actually there in the Holy Scriptures is God's name YHWH (and it is evidenced by the Dead Sea Scrolls that YHWH was there in John's day).

CJB Zechariah 14:1-4 ¹ Look, a day is coming for Yehoveh when your plunder, [Yerushalayim], will be divided right there within you. ² "For I will gather all the nations against Yerushalayim for war. The city will be taken, the houses will be rifled, the women will be raped, and half the city will go into exile; but the rest of the people will not be cut off from the city."

³ Then Yehoveh will go out and fight against those nations, fighting as on a day of battle. ⁴ On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies to the east of Yerushalayim; and the Mount of Olives will be split in half from east to west, to make a huge valley. Half of the mountain will move toward the north, and half of it toward the south.

YHWH is used in the Old Testament either to indicate the Father or the totality of God. So indeed the concept in Revelation that God was and is, but is no longer "coming" (because He already has come, relative to the End Times timeline), is validated by the Prophet Zechariah as we have just read about the moment He arrives. And this passage is also going to play a role a little later in the 7th Bowl Judgment as well. We'll discuss that when we get there.

One of the more important parts to the declaration of the angel of the waters concerning Yehoveh is that He is just in these judgments He is handing down. We must understand that the term "just" doesn't mean fair or right in some ethereal or fuzzy sense of morality or righteousness. It is meant in a judicial, legal sense. This is another matter that can trip up Christians because (even more so in modern times) justice, mercy, love, and many other attributes and principles of God are seen through contemporary morals and standards. And especially since the legal part of the Bible....the Torah.... has long been dismissed as obsolete and irrelevant for the Church, then what is "just" has become a moving target based on evolving Christian sentiments. But when we understand that for John and for all previous biblical periods, justice can only be defined within the Law of Moses, then we can understand what standard of justice is going to be upheld. The same standard for Moses remains relevant to us to this day (and into the End Times) even though most of Christianity denies it. Therefore, since measure-for-measure is a fundamental characteristic of God's justice system

in the Torah, then this is given as the reason in verse 6 that God's judgments on mankind are "just". In fact (I might add), if God was to NOT act out in judgment on the wicked it would NOT be just and He would be violating His own covenant.

Another voice now chimes in to express the righteousness of God's judgments and it comes from the altar. This verse is variously translated in different Bible versions such that, as in the CJB, it is the altar itself that appears to be speaking but in other translations, it is the voice from "another from the altar" that is speaking. In checking the Greek, indeed the word **allos** is there, and it means "another". I confess that it could well be that different Greek manuscripts have it written differently and that accounts for the disagreement. Be that as it may, unless the term "altar" is being used figuratively (because obviously inanimate altars can't speak), then likely indeed it is "another from the altar" that is the proper sense of it. And that harkens back to Revelation chapter 6.

CJB Revelation 6:9-11 ⁹ *When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been put to death for proclaiming the Word of God, that is, for bearing witness.* ¹⁰ *They cried out in a loud voice, "Sovereign Ruler, HaKadosh, the True One, how long will it be before you judge the people living on earth and avenge our blood?"*

¹¹ *Each of them was given a white robe; and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow-servants should be reached, of their brothers who would be killed, just as they had been.*

That it is the souls of martyrs under the Heavenly altar who join with the angel of the waters in agreeing with God that His judgments are just, makes the most sense because they were (in Revelation 6) asking for justice for their murder. However God told them they would have to wait until the full number of their fellow servants (Believers) were reached. And indeed, in Revelation chapter 14, we read that the one like a Son of Man had come on a cloud with a sickle, and reaped the harvest. Since it is my contention that this is a harvest of Believers, then it means that the full number of their fellow servants has been reached and so the time for the martyred souls who have been waiting for justice is over and it is finally happening.

Here the martyred souls call God the God of Heaven's armies, which is an Old Testament term used often to indicate YHWH, God the Father. Thus this is not addressed to the Lamb: Christ.

The 4th bowl is now emptied, and it attacks the sun.... fire... the 3rd of the elements of nature of Greek and Jewish belief in the New Testament era and somewhat earlier. So now God has attacked 3 of the 4 elements of nature, and this of course says to anyone of John's day that every aspect of everything that forms nature, including humans, is under God's wrathful judgment....except for one still remaining: air.

Now might be a good time to detour for just a moment to explain that this belief in the 4 elements of nature (earth, water, fire and air) remained alive and well rather universally until the era of the Enlightenment in the 18th century. It was a foundational belief of the Church even beyond that time.

Listen to the words of Oecumenius, a Church Father of the 10th century, in his comments on Revelation chapter 16.

And now the Apocalypse explains to us that an angel is over the waters. For although the world is constituted out of the four elements of air, fire, earth and also water.... although some think that the heavenly things are established from some fifth element that they say is ethereal and moves in a circle.....

So although to us of the 21st century the thought of air, fire, earth and water as the 4 elements of nature is myth, in fact the gentile Church believed it on into the 1800's, right along with a few sects of Jews, including those adherents of Kabbalah who still believe it.

Verse 8 says that the sun was permitted to burn people with fire. And to emphasize that this is meant literally (even though it could, as well, include a symbolic meaning) verse 9 says that people will be burned by the intense heat of the sun. In the 4th Trumpet Judgment the sun was darkened; but now with this Bowl Judgment it is made hotter than ever. The sun, in the Bible, is seen as a blessing to mankind because it is essential to life. But now God takes square aim at this essential star that we cannot do without, and which must function in a precise way or it turns the earth either into a moon-like deep freeze or a Mercury-like oven.

We probably ought to be astounded to read that even when the sun begins acting as an adversary to mankind instead of as a friend, the reaction of humanity will be to curse the name of God. In other words, as with Pharaoh in Egypt, the hearts of the world's remaining population will become so hardened towards the Lord that even though they thoroughly understand, now, that it is He that is causing these calamities; and it is He who can control even the sun with but a thought; that rather than submit to His holy authority and plead for mercy they will only curse Him even more. This is virtually the same stance towards God that Satan has taken since time immemorial. Satan knows who God is, what He is capable of, and yet rather than submit to God Satan will fight until His total destruction.

Do we not see this of people in our society today? Are not our prisons full of unrepentant criminals for whom evil is the norm..... and they like it? Satan has sowed his evil seed well, and deep among the roots of mankind. But for that segment of unrepentant humanity the end is near; perhaps nearer than we think.

We'll continue with the Bowl Judgments next time.