

The Bowls of Wrath

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Revelation 15:1-8, 16:1-21

We've been reading through the book of Revelation and thinking about how the many images and symbols give us an idea of who God is and how God works. Revelation teaches that God is just. God is all-powerful. And, God is merciful. The words of Revelation are hopeful! They are an encouragement for us to remain faithful, even when we're in the midst of suffering and difficulty. Even if we don't see it in the moment, God is completely in control. All through Revelation, we see contrasts between the faithful who follow Jesus Christ, "the Lamb," and those who follow the idols of the world or "the beast." Often we see the same themes repeated in different ways. For example, earlier we read about the seven seals, which include judgements on evil. Riders on horses were released on the world to cause destruction. Many of these judgements are things that humanity experiences throughout history, things such as war and famine. In Revelation, we also read about the seven trumpets that bring various judgements symbolized with vivid images of hail, fire, and blood. Today, we read about the final set of seven judgments, the "bowls of wrath." Each of these repeats similar themes, rather than giving a chronological order of what will happen in the future. They represent today's reality, as well as a future time when evil will be no more.

Today, we start with a scene in heaven. A "sea of glass" represents the holiness of God. We are separate from God as if there is a body of water between us. The fire mixed in the sea symbolizes purification. All of the different plagues are terrible, but they represent a way that evil is cleaned up, or purified, so that God can establish a new kingdom, a world where there is no more pain and suffering. Beside the sea, stand "those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name." They hold "harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb..."

What does it mean that they had "conquered the beast"? The word conquered here is actually in the present tense, meaning people continue to conquer the beast. It's not just a one-time thing that happened. We start to follow "the beast" in our daily lives, every time we turn away from the way of Christ and instead focus on ourselves and our own fears. As we've seen in previous chapters of Revelation, the way the faithful conquer evil is not through violence. It's not through battle as in a war. The meaning of conquer here is to have victory over evil in the same way that Jesus won the victory over evil. Jesus followed God's way of love and non-violence, even when it meant allowing himself to be tortured and hung on a cross. For those who suffer persecution, to conquer means to remain faithful to God, even if it means one's own death. For us it may not mean actually becoming a martyr. But, if we want to follow Jesus, it does mean we need to die to ourselves. This is what Jesus means when he says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. We still care for ourselves, but above that concern is our desire to do God's will. We then need not fear for ourselves or for anything, because we are learning to trust in the power of God. Our relationship with God, made possible through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is the most important thing. It's where we start. We then allow all our decisions and cares in our lives to be influenced by our relationship with Jesus Christ. This relationship grows through prayer, Bible reading, and sharing with other believers.

Anyway, the faithful conquerors stand beside the sea, purified through their sacrificed lives. They hold "harps of God," which symbolize worship, and they sing "the song of Moses", and "the song of the Lamb." This links the story of Moses with the work of Jesus Christ. God works through Moses to free the Israelites from the Pharaoh, and slavery and in Egypt. As the Israelites flee Pharaoh's army, God helps them cross the Red Sea. The attacking army ends up drowning, but the Israelites are saved. Years later, Jesus Christ, the "Lamb of God" made a way for all people to be saved from being slaves to sin.

After the scene of worship in heaven, we move to the earth, where seven bowls of God's wrath are poured out. As I've said at other times, God's wrath is different from human wrath. The wrath of God is often the pain we feel when we follow a different way than God's perfect and loving way. We naturally experience the negative effects of our own sin as well as the sin of others. God values our freedom enough to let us go our own way. But, when we choose a self-centred way, we will experience the "wrath" of turning ourselves away from our God. God is our Creator, the source of all love, joy and peace. When we go our own way, we head further and further away from love, joy, and peace, deeper and deeper into misery. Proverbs 14, verse 12 says, "There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death." Yet, God is merciful, always ready to accept us back when we admit our sin.

The Hebrew scriptures often talk about bowls of God's wrath when talking about God's judgments on sin. The word for bowls used in the judgements is the same word used for the bowls used for incense in chapter 5, verse 8, and chapter 8, verse 3. The bowls of incense represent the prayers of the faithful and the persecuted. Some of their prayers would likely be, "When, O God, will you judge those who are doing evil? When will you take control, getting rid of all evil, and establish your kingdom of peace?" All the judgement bowls could be God's response to these prayers. God will deal with evil. There will be justice. And, someday evil will end. God's judgements will be powerful and complete. In fact, today's final judgement symbols are stronger in their intensity. Whereas with the trumpet judgements we often read that 1/3 of something was destroyed, or 1/3 of the people died, with the bowl judgements we no longer see the fractions. This likely signifies that soon the judgements on evil will finally be complete.

The bowls of wrath are also referred to as plagues. In fact, there are many parallels to the story of God freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. God releases a series of plagues, demonstrating God's power over human power. God shows power even over the Egyptian idols and gods which were thought to have control over things like the weather. These plagues in Egypt are connected with the seven trumpet and the seven bowl judgements. All three types of judgement contain a plague of hail, seas or rivers that turn to blood, and darkness covering the land. Each of these has meaning. For example, the darkness symbolizes separation from God. In contrast to this, we often hear that Jesus is the "Light of the world." He is the one through whom we can have a close relationship with God, our Creator. The plagues often reveal God's cosmic power. They also symbolize the natural but devastating effects of sin, of turning from God's ways.

We can see many other parallels with the plagues of Egypt, but one area that really caught my eye was how, after one of the bowl plagues, it says, "...they did not repent..." (and give God glory) (chapter 16 verse 9). After another plague it says, "...they did not repent of their deeds." (Verse 11). And later, in verse 21, we read that instead of repenting, the people "cursed God." This repeated lack of repentance feels very similar to the story of the plagues in Egypt. Moses challenges Pharaoh to let the people go free, but several times Pharaoh refuses to repent. Each time, God sends another plague.

There are those who see these judgements in Revelation as being the punishment for those who have rejected God. They believe that those who do evil have had their entire lives to admit their sin and turn back to God, but now they see these plagues as their final punishment – but these judgements are not yet the end! After each bowl, God gives a chance for people to turn back and follow the way of God's Son, Jesus. Even as God allows these plagues to happen, God's mercy is shown in that there is still room for anyone to turn back to God and experience God's love and healing. Matthew 13:15 says, "...this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them." God's purpose is not to crush all the wicked people. God's purpose is that they realise they are going the wrong way. God does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked.

In Ezekiel 18, verse 23 God says, “Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?”

Near the end of our Revelation chapters we read about thunder and lightning, and a violent earthquake (signs of God’s power, and judgement). Here the focus is on the “great” nation, Babylon. They represented evil done against Israel, and against God. In verse 20, it says, “every island fled away and no mountains were to be found.” Yet, already according to chapter 6, “every mountain and island” had already been removed! This is just one of many examples of how these images are symbolic rather than literal. There is much more that could be said about the symbols represented in these plagues, but I’d like to now think about how this all connects with us today.

First of all, God does hear our prayers. In earlier chapters, the bowls of incense symbolized the prayers of the followers of Jesus. Now, possibly in answer to those prayers, God acts, showing us that the suffering and death of the faithful is not in vain. By following the way of Jesus, in obedience to God, they suffer for their faith. But, Revelation makes clear there will come a time when God will make all things right.

My personal experience is not with suffering or life and death issues, but I’ve experienced the power of God answering prayer, beyond my understanding. There was a time, earlier in my life, when I earnestly prayed that God would lead me to get a counselling position, in a city where my girlfriend at the time was living. Then, I was surprised that, for some reason, I was not accepted to work there. Not long after that, my girlfriend decided things weren’t working with us, and we broke up. I couldn’t understand why God didn’t seem to be answering my prayers. Eventually, I ended up in Japan where God showed me new experiences in church ministry, and I was blessed to now have a family. God was in control above all that was happening in my life.

If we experience great suffering in our lives, it’s possible we may not see God’s answers to our prayers until we meet God at the end of our lives. The words of Revelation encourage us to trust that God has everything under control, even when things seem out of control. We may suffer with major health issues, stress over the pandemic, or not enough work or money to live comfortably. We may be having a tough time in a relationship. If we remember how God has power greater than anyone can imagine, how God has the power to allow or stop these cosmic plagues that we read about in Revelation, it’s easier to see that God also has the ability to work in our lives.

We need not fear evil because our God is a God of justice. Evil will not win in the end. We need to be alert, though. In verse 15, God says, “See, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake...” No one knows the day when Christ will come again, just like no one usually knows when a thief will come. We need to be prepared for the possibility that Christ could return even an hour from now! The reality is that we’re not always ready. We’re often part of the group that follows the beast. Every time we forget to care for others, every time we focus too much on our own fears and problems, forgetting to walk with Christ and seek the way of love, we start following the beast. That sin affects us all. But, God is merciful, when we begin to follow unhealthy ways that draw us away from God, we also start to experience God’s wrath, the pain that comes from moving away from the source of love. God is merciful and forgiving, waiting to accept us when we turn back. Are you ready for Christ to return? May we be ready and committed to the way of Christ when he returns. Let’s pray.

O Lord, there are many frightening things in this world. Sometimes it can be overwhelming to think about all the challenges around us. Yet, you are in control. Thank-you that you work for justice. Thank-you too that you are both holy and merciful, giving opportunities for us to repent and turn back to you when we fall short. Help us to trust that you do hear our prayers. May we remember that in your power you are in control of any situation. Teach us to trust in you. And, when we face suffering, we pray for your strength to remain faithful, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.