

The Vision of the Seven Last Plagues

by John F. Walvoord

John F. Walvoord's sermon explores the significance of the seven last plagues as divine judgments leading to the second coming of Christ, emphasizing God's holiness and the victory of the faithful.

Scripture: Revelation 15:1-7

Topics: "Divine Judgment", "Second Coming"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into Revelation 15 and 16, unveiling the sequence of events leading to Christ's second coming, highlighted by the seven last plagues as divine judgments before His return. The crescendo of events from the seals to the trumpets to the vials signifies the culmination of God's wrath and the imminent second coming of Christ. The vision of the sea of glass mingled with fire symbolizes divine judgment and the victory of those who stood firm against the beast, emphasizing their reward and position before God's throne.

Transcript

15:1-2 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 his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass, having the harps of God.

Chapters 15 and 16 of Revelation bring to consummation the chronologically ordered events leading up to the second coming of Christ described in chapter 19. These are introduced in this chapter as "the seven last plagues" which are the divine judgments preceding the second coming of Christ. As previously indicated, the chronological order of events in Revelation is presented basically in the seven seals (6:1-17; 8:1). The seventh seal includes all of the seven trumpets (8:1-9:21; 11:15-19). The seven vials or bowls of divine judgment are included in the seventh trumpet. From this it can be seen that the order of events is one of dramatic crescendo, the seventh seal being all-inclusive of the end-time events including the seven trumpets, and the seventh trumpet including the events described in the seven vials. The second coming of Christ follows this order of events immediately after the seventh vial. The intervening sections such as 10:1-11:14; 13-14; 17-19 do not advance the narrative chronologically. Chapter 19 of Revelation follows immediately after chapter 16 in the chronological development.

The final series of the seven last plagues is introduced by the vision in which John sees "another sign in heaven." The word another refers to the two preceding signs of chapter 12, namely, the woman who

appeared as "a great wonder in heaven," literally "a great sign in heaven" (12:1), and the "great red dragon" (12:3), signifying the empire of the beast under Satan's control. The three signs taken together represent important elements in the prophetic scene: (1) Israel, that is, the woman; (2) the final world empire under the control of Satan and the beast, that is, the great red dragon; and (3) the seven angels having the seven last plagues, that is, the divine judgment upon the satanic system and political power of the beast.

The sign in heaven is described as "great and marvellous" (Gr., mega kai thaumaston). These words appear together only here and in verse 3 (the description of the works of God) in the entire New Testament, though they appear separately elsewhere.

Central in the vision given to John are seven angels, apparently another group of seven angels not to be confused with any other group of seven, as the article is not used with the expression. This new group of seven angels is described as having the seven last plagues. As in the trumpets and seals, the number of completion, seven, is used. It is most significant that they are described as "last," more emphatic in the Greek (literally "having seven plagues, the last ones"). This implies that the previous judgments unfolding in the breaking of the seals and the blowing of the trumpets were also plagues, that is, divine judgments of God pouring out affliction upon a wicked world. (Cf. other divine judgments in 9:18, 20; 11:6; 13:3, 12, 14. "Wound" is "plague" in the original. Cf. also 16:7-9; 18:8; 19:2; 22:18.) That they are described as the last plagues shows that they are the final judgments preceding the second coming itself.

The seven plagues are further described as acts of judgment which "filled up the wrath of God." The concept of "filled up" (Gr., etelesthe,,) means to bring to conclusion or to the ultimate goal, that is, a fulfillment of divine purpose. The word for "wrath" is not orge,, but thymos, often translated "anger." In view is not divine wrath as an attitude, but divine judgment as the expression of God's wrath. The word orge is used in Revelation 16:19 in the final judgment upon Babylon extending from the seventh vial. As Arndt and Gingrich observe, the combination of thymos and orge,, connotes the strongest kind of outpouring of divine judgment. The word thymos is defined as "anger, wrath, rage."²⁶⁴ It may be concluded, therefore, that the anger of God is the preliminary expression, the wrath of God is the final expression of divine righteousness.

The scene in heaven is described thus by John: "as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire." This seems to be an allusion to the same situation as in 4:6 where a "sea of glass like unto crystal" is "in the midst of the throne." Alford observes,

The fact, that the personages of the former heavenly vision are still present, ver. 7, seems to remove all doubt of this being the same sea of glass as that before described, Ch. 4:6.²⁶⁵

Here the sea of glass has two variations. The sea of glass is said to be "mingled with fire," the statement qualified by the phrase "as it were" (Gr., ho,,s). In both instances it is obvious that John does not see an ordinary sea because the heavenly hosts stand upon it. The symbolism, however, is rich. The sea is designed to reflect the glory of God. In chapter 4 its description "like unto crystal" speaks of the holiness of God. Here the sea mingled with fire speaks of divine judgment proceeding from God's holiness. The fact that the saints are able to stand upon it reflects the faithfulness of God in upholding His own in keeping with His divine character. Some suggest that the sea is specifically the Word of God with its many precious promises to the saints.²⁶⁶

Upon this sea stand an innumerable company of those who "had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name." These unmistakably are the martyred dead destroyed by the beast of Revelation 13:1-10 whose number is given in 13:18. Their triumph consists in the fact that they remained faithful to death instead of yielding to the blasphemous demand of the beast. Their resurrection and reward are described in 20:4-6. These have "harps of God" (no article before "harps" [lyres] in original). The harp (lyre) and the trumpet are the only musical instruments mentioned in the book of Revelation. Though possessed by this group of saints, the harps apparently are not given to all the martyred dead (cf. absence of harps in 7:9-17). The harpers' privileged position before the throne contributing to the heavenly harmony of the chorus of the redeemed is their reward for refusing to worship the beast, receive his mark, bow to his image, or be identified with his number. They clearly belong to saints martyred during the time of great tribulation, confirming that the time schedule is near the end of the period and contrasting them to saints of other ages.

The Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb (15:3-4)

15:3-4 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. 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 hymn of praise sung by the martyred saints in glory is identified as "the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb." The fact that "song" (Gr., *o,,de,,n*) is repeated with a definite article in both cases would lead to the conclusion that two songs are in view rather than one, both being sung by the martyred throng. The former recounts the faithfulness of God to Israel as a nation in recognition that a large number of Israelites are among these martyred dead. The song of the Lamb speaks of redemption from sin made possible by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, and would include all the saints.

There has been difference of opinion as to what song is meant by "the song of Moses." Walter Scott follows the traditional interpretation in referring it to the song of Exodus 15 sung by Moses and the children of Israel on the occasion of their triumph over the host of Pharaoh at the Red Sea.²⁶⁷ The alternative view advanced by J. B. Smith has much to commend it, however.²⁶⁸ He suggests that the song of Moses is the one recorded in Deuteronomy 32, a song personally written and spoken to the children of Israel by Moses himself at the close of his career. It is a comprehensive picture of God's faithfulness to Israel and His ultimate purpose to defeat their enemies. This latter song more nearly corresponds to the situation found here in Revelation 15. Both passages, however, ascribe praise to God and are similar in many ways to the hymn here recorded.

Praise ascribed to God begins with the statement "Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty." The unusual expression of verse 1 is carried over here to the works of God as "great" in extent and "marvellous" or wonderful, that is, arousing wonder or astonishment, which could apply to the works of God in the past, but more probably anticipates the great work just ahead. The verb is omitted and could be past, present, or future, though the thought seems to be the present tense with a futuristic intent. God is also described as "just and true" in His ways. He is just, in that He is perfectly righteous. He is true, in that He keeps His promises. The expression closing verse 3, "King of saints," is in the better manuscripts properly "King of the nations." God, the sovereign ruler of all men, is shortly to manifest this sovereignty and divine judgment to the wicked world.

The futuristic context of this ascription of praise is indicated in the question of verse 4, "Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name?" Though the nations neither fear God nor glorify Him in their mad unbelief during the great tribulation, the day is to come soon when they will both fear Him and be forced to acknowledge Him as God. A similar question is found in Jeremiah 10:7: "Who would not fear thee, O King of nations?" (Cf. also Rev. 14:7.) The prospect of all nations worshiping the Lord, a familiar theme of the prophets, is brought out in the next statement: "For thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee" (cf. Ps. 2:8-9; 24:1-10; 66:1-4; 72:8-11; 86:9; Isa. 2:2-4; 9:6-7; 66:18-23; Dan. 7:14; Zeph. 2:11; Zech. 14:9).

The concluding phrase in the song speaks of the divine judgments which are revealed, speaking of the application of divine righteousness to the wicked earthly situation. The righteous judgment from God proceeds from what He is as described in this song: the God who is almighty, righteous, true, holy, just, and worthy of worship.

The Tabernacle of the Testimony in Heaven Opened (15:5-6)

15:5-6 And after that I looked, and, behold, the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was opened: And 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.

Another vision now introduced by John as a later development constitutes the immediate introduction of the judgments represented in the vials. Our attention is arrested by the phrase "I looked, and, behold." This expression always introduces something dramatically new. As John observes, the Holy of Holies in the heavenly Tabernacle is opened. The expression "the temple" (Gr., naos) refers to the inner holy place of the Tabernacle, the design of which God gave to Israel during the wilderness wandering. The expression "the tabernacle of the testimony" is a reference to the whole tentlike structure, a portion of which contained the Holy of Holies. It is described as "the tabernacle of the testimony" because of the presence of the tables of stone containing the ten commandments which were placed in the ark of the testimony in the Holy of Holies (cf. Exodus 32:15; Acts 7:44) and is mentioned frequently in the Old Testament (Exodus 38:21; Num. 1:50, 53; 10:11; 17:7-8; 18:2).

As John looks intently on the scene, the sanctuary is opened, that is, the curtain is parted, and seven angels are seen coming out of the sanctuary. The holy place, into which the high priests alone could go and only after proper sacrifices, does not exclude holy angels who have no sin. Each of the angels is carrying one of the vials containing the seven plagues and is described as being clothed in pure white linen and girded with a golden girdle.

The whole scene is most symbolic of what is about to happen. The angels coming out of the sanctuary indicate that the judgments to be poured out stem from the holiness of God and are properly required of God who must do all things right. The suggestion of J. B. Smith that the clothing of linen requires that these be regarded as the seven angels of the churches of Revelation 2 and 3 is rather farfetched.²⁶⁹ Linen here, as in the garment of the wife of the Lamb (19:8), represents righteousness in action, certainly proper of holy angels and not requiring in their use the cleansing of redemptive blood. The symbolism of the golden girdles is less clear, except that they bind the linen. If gold reflects the glory of God, it would point to the conclusion that these angels pouring out righteous judgments on the earth thereby bring glory to God.

Seven Golden Vials Given to the Angels (15:7-8)

15:7-8 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. 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 seven angels described as already having the seven plagues in verse 6 are given seven golden vials or bowls described as full of the wrath of God in verse 7. The reference to plagues in verse 6 may be prophetic, or the bestowal of the vials may be the authorization to use them. The extent of the divine judgment is indicated by the word full indicating the devastating character of this divine judgment. The word for "wrath" is thymos, literally "anger," rather than orge,, properly "wrath." The solemn reminder that God lives forever and ever gives a solemn cast to the wrath that is to be poured out to be inflicted forever and ever upon those who perish.

As the angels emerge from the sanctuary, it is filled with smoke proceeding from the glory of God and His power, a pointed reminder of the ineffable holiness of God. The scene can be compared to that when the cloud filled the Tabernacle in Exodus 40:34-35. Access into the sanctuary is made impossible by the smoke until the judgments contained in the seven plagues are fulfilled. It is an ominous sign of impending doom for those who persist in their blasphemous disregard of the sovereignty and holiness of God.

264 Amdt and Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, p. 366.

265 Henry Alford, The Greek New Testament, IV, 693-94.

266 Cf. H. A. Ironside, Lectures on the Revelation, pp. 271-72.

267 Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, p. 315.

268 A Revelation of Jesus Christ, pp. 224-26.

269 Ibid., p. 226.

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