

Revelation 15-19: Bowls of Wrath, Babylon

Chapters 15 and 16 describe those judgments in yet another way, through a scene in which seven angels come with seven bowls. Revelation 15:1 says that they pour out “the seven last plagues—last, because with them God’s wrath is completed.” The seven bowls poured out by the seven angels are like the seven trumpets, but with one major difference. The seven trumpets poured out judgment on one-third of the earth, a fraction of the earth, but these plagues come upon the whole earth. Everyone receives this judgment, and after they receive it, Revelation 16:9-11 tells us that they refused to repent of what they had done. They cursed God. They refused to repent and glorify Him. They cursed the God of heaven because of their pain and their sores. This is the judgment of God upon unbelievers as they retain their hostility toward God.

I would like to make a little comment here. Sometimes people have the idea that suffering hardship can bring hope and can bring people back to God. That is absolutely true, but there is no guarantee that hardship will bring people to God. Remember we talked about AIDS last week, and we talked about the flood and so forth. Are those harbingers of God’s judgment? They are. Is cancer a warning of death—“get ready to meet God”? It is. Not that God sends cancer, but every evil, every death, speaks of God’s judgment. In Luke 13, Jesus says, “Did the tower of Siloam fall on the worst 18 people in Jerusalem?” Do you remember this? They had asked Him, “What about those 18 upon whom the tower of Siloam fell?” Jesus said, “Do you think they were any worse than the rest? No, but unless you repent, you will likewise perish.” Every time there is an accident, every time there is a sudden death, every time there is a flood, every time there is a plague, it reminds us that the day of our death and the day of our reckoning is coming, and some people hear it and respond. They take warning when they see evils and suffering. I am sure there are some people in this room who repented when they saw the consequences of sin in their own lives. How many of you here are adult converts (and by “adult” I mean you were out of high school when you became a Christian)? How many of you were partly led to come to the Lord because you saw the effects of sin in your own life? Look around, you see the hands going up. So the miseries caused by sin can become a blessed warning. On the other hand, other people suffer these things and they just get angry at God. They say, “There cannot be a God who has allowed this to happen to me. I hate it. I want nothing to do with it.” Suffering in itself is not a blessing. When spiritual insight and perspective is added to it, suffering can lead to a blessing, but the unbeliever fails to respond to the Word of God.

Chapters 15 and 16 take us to the judgment day again. Chapter 17 backtracks. We heard in Revelation 14:8 about judgment on Babylon, but the strange thing is that we have not yet really even met Babylon. We hear about its downfall before we have heard about its rise. So what is Babylon? I already gave you one hint. Babylon is the city of Babel. It is the Babylonians in antiquity who had that insatiable desire and that great pride, but Babylon also is something else in the book of Revelation. You might say that it is a figure with many forms. Revelation 17:1 says, “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.’” That is that phrase again—“those who dwell in the earth.” That refers to those who look only at the earth and live for the earth.

Then John was carried away to have a vision of this woman, who was seated on a scarlet beast (verse 3). That sounds kind of like the beasts again, and, in fact, it is like the beasts. The woman is seated on the beast who has blasphemous names. We heard that before in chapter 13, and there we are again. The sea beast is described in chapter 13:1, with seven heads and 10 horns. So Babylon is in allegiance with the sea beast, that is to say, political power. The woman is dressed in purple and scarlet, glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls and she is holding up a golden cup in her hand and she is looking at you. She

is winking at you, guys, but don't wink back, because her cup is filled with abominable things, the filth of her adulteries. On her head, is written "Mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth." If you look at the woman, you see she is a little bit intoxicated. She has been drinking something out of this goblet she has in her hand. I wonder what it is. You can see she is so drunk that it is dribbling down her chin a little bit. It is red; maybe she has been drinking too much wine. No, verse 6 tells us that she is drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. Now this is the fluidity of the metaphor. We actually have two ways in which Babylon is depicted. Babylon is kind of the sea beast or like the mark of the beast and it says to the inhabitants of the earth, "Come, let's have pleasure, let's have adultery and let's have gold and silver. Have pleasure with me." But Babylon is also a murderer. It also slaughters the saints. Babylon is both the velvet glove and the iron fist.

Chapters 17 and 18, however, are going to stress that Babylon has seven heads. This is probably because Babylon represents Rome. Chapter 17 verse 9 says that these seven heads are the seven hills. Now what is the city on seven hills? Rome. She is on seven hills. The heads are seven hills. The beast comes out of the abyss and goes into destruction. The beast is also an eighth king. The scarlet beast is Rome, the city built on seven hills, and it had a series of eight kings who had power relatively briefly around this time and who were waging war against the church, so that is one part. It is Babylon. The main emphasis of Babylon is that this is the great city, the rich city, Babylon in her riches. We see this in chapter 18 when we hear about the fall of Babylon, which is explained in 18:2-3. It is the haunt of demons, a demonic place. And because of their adultery and their luxury and their drunkenness, the word is, "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not participate with her in her sins." Her sins are piled high. It is like too many pieces of wood in a wheelbarrow or too many bricks in your arms or too many books in your arms and you are starting to lose track. You are piled high and you begin to wobble back and forth and you know it is going to crash. In the same way, the sins of Babylon are stacked so high that you know they are going to fall. There is the sin of adultery and demonism and boasting or independence and torturing the saints and drinking their blood (18:1-8).

The next section shows that there is also the sin of unscrupulous commerce. In verses 9-11 we read that the kings and the merchants of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared in her luxury will weep and mourn over her. I love the imagery—"They will stand far off and cry." Have you ever seen a house on fire? There are two kinds of people at that fire. There is the one kind of person who owned the house, and that person tries to get in the house and pull things out. He is weeping and standing closer than he should to the fire. Then there are other people who stand farther away to give the mourning family a little room. They are kind of saying, "What a shame," but they do not really care. They just happened to be driving by and stopped to watch the fire. The kings of the earth do not really care about Babylon. They mourn over Babylon's fall, but they mourn the way you would mourn over the death of a corporation to whom you sold your product at a good price. They mourn the way you might mourn over death of a hated but effective leader of a corporation. You mourn because you are sorry for what you are losing yourself, and that is what these kings and merchants say. They mourn, verse 11, because they are no longer able to buy and trade and make money from trading their "cargos of gold, silver, precious stone, pearls, fine linen, purple silk, scarlet cloth, wood, ivory, bronze, marble, various spices, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wheat, fine flour, cattle and sheep, horses and carriages and the bodies and the souls of men." There it is—that is the clue to Babylon. It is not that she trades; there is nothing wrong with trading. The problem with those in Babylon is that they will trade anything. They will trade anything in which there is a profit. If there is a profit in cinnamon, they will sell cinnamon, and if there is a profit in wood or gold or pearls or wheat, fine. And if there is a profit to be made in the bodies of men in slave trading, they will do that, and if there is a profit to be made in the souls of men, they will do that. The problem is not with commerce; the problem is with saying, "I am going to make a dollar. I

am going to make money, and I will trade anything I need to.” I talked to a person once who said, “My business is making money. My business is buying businesses. I do not make anything; I get rich.” That is the problem. That is Babylon, a great city consumed by her pride and by her self-indulgence, and so the city falls and people only lament at a distance.

Some people wonder about the response to the fall of Babylon. They think that perhaps it is unworthy of Christians. When Babylon falls, chapter 19 says the multitude in heaven shouts, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are His judgments. He is avenging on her the blood of His saints. Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.” Is this unworthy of a Christian? We talked about that a little last week, did we not? We do not gloat at the fall of Babylon, and we do not take delight in the death of the wicked. God Himself says that He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. But there is a day when people are sealed in their iniquity, and when they are sealed, when they are identified with their sins, when they have negated the last chance to repent and the day of the dawning of eternity and new heavens and new earth has come, then we say, “At last, they are done, thank God. The power of sin, the power of Satan is finally over. No more torture, no more oppression—the downfall of God’s adversaries has indeed come.”

Chapter 21:8, about the new heavens and new earth, says, “But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur.” It is not talking about those who tell lies, but liars. Everybody here has probably told a lie at some point in his or her life, but it is one thing to tell a lie and it is another thing to be a liar. Everybody in this room has probably thought a murderous thought, but it is another thing to be a murderer. When you and your sin are one, then you cannot be admitted into heaven, and there should be joy when the power of evil to harm and to pervert is finally gone.

There is one thing I want to talk about briefly. It is the numbers, the timing of the book of Revelation—the reference to “time, times and half a time.” I made the quick comment that this refers to the whole Gospel age. I would like to explain that to you very briefly so that you can begin to understand the way in which Revelation uses some of its symbols. We could say broadly that the symbols of Revelation work in three different ways. With some symbols, there is virtually no change in meaning from original usage earlier in the Bible to the usage in Revelation. For example, the seal in Ezekiel 9 is the same as the seal in Revelation 9. There is no change at all. With other symbols, there is a little change. For example, the one who rules with the rod of iron is a prophecy of an unnamed Messiah in Psalm 2, but then we find out for sure that this is Jesus in Revelation. It is a small shift.

With some other symbols, though, there is a fairly significant shift. An example would be the two witnesses, which we talked about briefly last week, from Revelation 11. That is taken from Zechariah 4. In Zechariah 4, the two witnesses are Zerubbabel and Joshua. Zerubbabel was a governor and Joshua was the high priest at the time of the restoration, and those two witnesses were prophesying about God’s love and restoration in that generation. Revelation takes that symbolism and changes it a lot by saying, “Those are all those who witness about Me, not just two specific people.” The imagery is all drawn over, and it goes from two concrete historical men to everybody who preaches the truth. Another example would be the word about Babylon in the Old Testament. We just studied the fall of literal city Babylon, which was a warrior city and a wealthy city. In Revelation, the name ‘Babylon’ is applied to Rome and to all who dwell on the earth for luxury and all who live to be intoxicated by adulteries, oppression, and so on. This is a large-scale broadening of the name ‘Babylon,’ and that is what usually happens with Old Testament imagery. It gets larger in its scope or broader in its reference.

The reference to “time, times, and half a time” is rooted in Daniel 2 and Daniel 7. The end of Daniel 2 is a vision. Remember, it says that there will be four kingdoms—the first of the four is Babylon and the last of the four is Rome. What happens in Revelation is that the first kingdom and the last kingdom are sort of brought together. In Daniel 7, it says that the fourth empire ends with a proud king who wages war on the saints, probably referring to Antiochus Epiphanes. Revelation broadens this out. Daniel 7 says that the proud king who wages war on the saints will do so and will prevail for “time, times and half a time.” The “time” is a year, “times” is two years, and “half a time” is half a year, so altogether we are talking about three-and-a-half years. Daniel 7 specifies the numbers. He actually gives the numbers 1290 and 1335 days, which is a little bit more than three-and-a-half years and, in fact, in Antiochus Epiphanes, whom we read about earlier today, did actually have his climax of oppression for a little over three years and then the Jews began to fight against him in the guerilla warfare of the Maccabean War.

If the fourth empire is Rome, and that is the real fulfillment of Daniel 7, and Rome persecutes for time, times and half a time, then this is the same period as some other things that are talked about in Revelation. It says in Revelation 13:5 that the beast from the sea persecutes for a time, times and half a time. That “time, times and half a time” is the same length as the span of the work of the two witnesses, which is also “time, times and half a time,” three-and-a-half years, 1260 days, and it is also the same period as that of the safety of the church. The church is protected for 42 months, 1260 days. That is in Revelation 12:6 and Revelation 12:14. It is also the period, according to Revelation 11:2, when the holy city is trodden under foot. The source of the image of the holy city being trodden under foot is Luke 21:24, which Jesus calls the time of the Gentiles. The time of the Gentiles is the whole Gospel age. Therefore, “time, times and half a time” is the whole Gospel age. I know that sounds complicated, but I really think it is true. I was actually doing some reading this week that gave me a chance to put that together for you, so you realize I am not just making stuff up as I go along. I am actually getting it from somewhere.

I am also telling you this because in some of these same passages, there are other time periods mentioned. The other thing, which I have said before and I am going to say it again in just a few minutes, is that I do believe that there is a renewed outpouring of evil, like a disease breaking out again, at the end of time. The final outbreak of evil preceding the return of Christ is relatively short. One of the reasons why I say that is there are a couple of places, such as chapter 11, where it says the witnesses will go for time, times and half a time, but then they will be dead. They will be killed, and those who killed them will gloat over their bodies for three and a half days. So the period of their witness is three and half years and the period of celebration over the downfall is three and a half days. In other places, it says that there will be persecution of the saints for one day, and there is a brief allusion to the final outbreak of evil in Revelation 20:7-10. So the Gospel age is one of persecution and witness. That is the characteristic of our age.

These things you are reading in Revelation are about the first century. They are about the end of time, but they are also about all times, because the whole Gospel age—time, times and half a time—is a time of testimony by witnesses, persecution by Satan (Revelation 13:5), and protection of the church (Revelation 12:16-14). All three—witness, persecution, and protection—are all going on at once.