

*Charts: The Third Parenthetical Visions: Chart #15, with reference to #8.*

## PREFACE

We are now ready for the final, climactic scene of all those comprising the group I have named the third parenthetical visions—and this last vision is directly preparatory to the seven bowl judgments. As a matter of fact, God in the Revelation *remarkably* prefaces the bowl judgments. [Look at Chart #8](#)

As we saw in Chart #8—the overview of the Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls—the seventh of each is—or contains—the next series. That is, the seventh Seal *is* the Trumpets, the seventh Trumpet ([the Third Woe](#)) *is* the Bowls of Wrath. But more than the previous judgments, God in His word, as it were, *teases* the final group of seven, because it is the climax, the third and final act to the entire Tribulation. It began back in Chapter Eleven.

### **Read Revelation 11:15.**

Reading that we think, *OK, here we go; the curtain is at last rising on the third act.* But no, what follows is the group of parenthetical visions that run from 11:15 to 15:8, with this last vision described in Chapter Fifteen being yet another prefacing scene for the Seven Bowls of Wrath! The actual pouring out of the bowls does not take place until v2 of Chapter Sixteen.

All of this—the inserted parenthetical visions, the “teases”—serves to heighten expectancy in the reader—and emphasizes the cataclysmic strength and finality of the bowl judgments. The curtain is indeed now ready to rise on the final act, but first—and I can’t help but see this in theatrical terms—we are granted, in Chapter Fifteen, a glimpse of the cast getting into costume and being handed their props before entering the stage proper. This chapter as a whole can also be seen as the overture playing before the first curtain opens. [Look at Chart #15](#)

### **Read Revelation 15:1-4.**

John Walvoord points out that this is the third and final of three important “signs in heaven.” The first and second we saw in Chapter Twelve.

### Read Revelation 12:1-2, 3.

*Walvoord:* 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.

v1

Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels who had seven plagues, which are the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished.

This final vision before the pouring out of the bowls is called “great and marvelous,” these two words (*megas and thaumaston*) used together only here and in v3, “express the enormous importance of this sign as it contains the final outpouring of God’s wrath on the wicked, unrepentant sinners of the earth” (MacArthur).

There appears to be nothing significant about these angels; they are just seven more holy messengers called to do the Lord’s bidding. In God’s word the number seven represents completeness, which is especially apt here, as the text tells us that this is the last of the three series of seven to be inflicted on the earth. In fact, the original Greek makes it even more emphatic: “...having seven plagues, the last ones.” This is it; no more after this.

Once again I am intrigued by something that doesn’t seem to be noticed by most of our commentators. ([I leave it to you to decide whether I have superior insight—or am certifiable.](#)) Twice in this chapter (v1 and v6) the seven angels are described as having— (“had,” *echontas*) that is, already in possession of—“seven plagues.”

**Note:** The word “plagues,” translating the Greek *plegas* (plee-yas’), although a faithful *transliteration*, can be misleading. The word means a blow (caused by a lash), a stripe or wound. It is translated “blows” in Acts 16:23—“When they had struck them with many **blows**, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely.” When we read “plagues” we probably have in mind a creeping sickness or disease, but these last seven judgments will be strong, abrupt and lethal *blows* inflicted on the earth. [More on this later.](#)

This is what intrigues me: Twice we are told the seven angels “have” the plagues to start with, but then in vv6-7 we are told that when the seven angels emerge from the temple (or, better, sanctuary), they are each handed a golden bowl “full of the wrath of God.”

Taken literally this would seem to differentiate between the “plagues” and the bowls of the wrath of God. The first is already in the possession of the angels, the second is given them at the last minute by “one of the four living creatures” from around the throne of God. Commentators, as a rule, just mush these together, but the text speaks of them as different things. Or, as MacArthur, they see the bowls as “the means by which” the plagues will be dispensed. But this misses the fact that the bowls are—as handed to the angels—already “full of the wrath of God.”

My conclusion is this: When these bowls are eventually flung out upon the earth, each blow is comprised of the combination of the two. Think of it this way: Each “plague” represents the raw material, as it were, while God’s wrath represents the *force* behind it, supplying the lethal intensity. I would reverse MacArthur; the “plagues” are the means by which the wrath of God is executed. Or, put a little differently, each angel’s plague is what God uses in His wrath against the earth.

*...which are the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished.*

And don’t miss that powerful closing phrase. What makes this last series of judgments so important? This will be the last—and very worst—of God’s wrath. After this, the well will be dry. This doesn’t mean once the seventh bowl is poured out, suddenly everything will be lovey-dovey between God and man; there will still be the individual judgments of the Great White Throne (20:11-15). But the Bowls represent the last expression of God’s *global* wrath upon all.

Herein lay clues to our interpretation of the Tribulation as a whole. If this be “the last,” then all that came before—the seals and the trumpets—were also plagues expressing the wrath of God. This also means that there is a logical chronology built into the Tribulation: Seals, then Trumpets, then, last, Bowls.

v2

And I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God.

Verse two calls up the imagery from Chapter Four of Revelation—

...and before the throne there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. (Revelation 4:6)

—Ezekiel 1:22, and Exodus 24:9-10:

Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself.

Here, however we have a new element added: fire. But John says that what he is seeing is “*something like a sea of glass mixed with fire,*” which means we need not press the vision to be literal fire mixed with literal glass. In this specific moment what had once been tranquil is now “*afame*” from the wrath of God about to be dispensed. And John saw something else.

*And I saw...those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God.*

As with most aspects of living in Christ, we tend to have a rather sterile view of “*faith.*” Probably our first thought is that our faith is synonymous with belief, but true faith is so much more. It is first of all *trust*, then *commitment*, then, if it necessarily comes to it, *sacrifice* and even *martyrdom*. Here the text tells us that faith is also *power*. Our text says that those believers who the beast killed during the Tribulation will—*by their faith*—be deemed “*victorious over*” their persecutor and executioner; the ESV calls them “*conquerors.*” And part of their reward for that trust in and commitment to Christ Jesus will be to stand in a place of honor close to the throne as a privileged choir to sing their worship and praise before the throne.

#### vv3-4

And they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, “Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty; Righteous and true are Your ways, King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy; For ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU, FOR YOUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS HAVE BEEN REVEALED.”

Two songs are mentioned here as the source of what the martyrs will sing: “the song of Moses,” and “the song of the Lamb.” The latter song, the song of the Lamb, probably refers back to that which was sung in 5:8-14—it, too, to the accompaniment of harps. This is the song voicing the Lamb’s worthiness to open the seven seals of the scroll by means of His sacrifice for “every tribe and tongue and people and nation.”

Opinions vary regarding the source for the song of Moses. The traditional reference is to the song in Exodus 15, sung after the Lord gave them passage through the Reed Sea. An alternative could be the song Moses voiced right before his death in Deuteronomy 32. As John Walvoord points out, regardless the sources for these songs,

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.

In either case, the text of these verses, while *thematically* similar, does not literally quote any of those sources. The situation is one of worship and praise before the throne for what is about to happen: the conclusive answer to all the prayers—no less from the Tribulation martyrs—for God to avenge the persecution and death of all those who have suffered for His name. In just moments that will occur as the seven bowls of plagues and wrath are poured out. And v4 points specifically to Christ’s Millennial reign, quoting Psalms 66 and 86, as well as other passages.

*Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy; For ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU, FOR YOUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS HAVE BEEN REVEALED.”*

Here the Lord is exalted for the fact that during the thousand years on earth, *all* nations will come to pay homage to the returned Messiah and King. [Now we are ready for the rest of this chapter.](#)

### **Read Revelation 15:5-8.**

v5

After these things I looked, and the temple of the tabernacle of testimony in heaven was opened,

We must not pass too quickly over this. First, here in a new vision for John it is repeated that heaven has its own “tabernacle of testimony”—from which the tabernacle that Moses created for Israel was patterned. “Tabernacle” translates the Greek *skenes*, which refers to the tent, the overall structure, while “temple” translates the Greek *naos*, which here refers to the sanctuary or Holy of Holies. “Testimony” is, of course, a reference to the ark of the covenant containing the testimony—the tablets given to Moses.

### **Read Hebrews 8:1-2, 4-5.**

What makes this worth a pause is that the angels, already in possession of the plagues, emerging from the tabernacle’s holiest place emphasizes that the root source of these plagues is God Himself.

Every day on this pitiful earth we are reminding that this present generation—youth and adults alike—is woefully ignorant of higher things. This generation is so busy tearing down statues of profound minds because those historical figures “did not share our values”—what stupefying arrogance!—that they don’t take the time to learn that all these men and women were—like us—a mixture of *many* qualities.

And they have the same level of ignorance with God and His Christ. God is not, nor has ever been the one-dimensional caricature they make Him out to be. He is indeed love, grace, mercy, forgiveness—but He is at the same time just, righteous, pure, sovereign, faithful to Himself, and, not least, holy. And at the end of all things that just and holy God will hand seven of His angels the means by which to once and for all blast this sorry earth with powerful, hideous blows that will destroy millions. Because He is holy, and will have lost patience with the rampant rebellion and sin on earth.

v6

and the seven angels who had the seven plagues came out of the temple, clothed in linen, clean and bright, and girded around their chests with golden sashes.

The apparel of these seven angels reveals their holiness, and purity. They are “clothed in linen, clean and bright.” Walvoord says the linen garments represent “righteousness in action.” [Turn please to Chapter Nineteen](#). This is a recurring theme in the Revelation. Every believer will be so attired at the marriage of the Lamb.

### **Read Revelation 19:7-8.**

When Christ returns He will be accompanied by armies dressed the same.

### **Read Revelation 19:12-14.**

*...and girded around their chests with golden sashes.*

Whatever the the golden sash represents, it certainly associates these holy messengers with their Lord, for Christ was wearing the same thing as He appeared to John at the outset of the Revelation:

...and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. (Revelation 1:13)

v7

Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God, who lives forever and ever.

Surrounding the throne, in close proximity to the throne seat of God, are the four living creatures—awesome, terrible-looking seraphim—one of which is designated to hand out the “seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God.” The KJV’s “vials” is really incorrect. In the upcoming chart for these last seven judgments ([distributed with next session](#)) I have included a photograph of a wall carving from Seti I’s temple in Abydos, showing the king making an incense offering to the god using a small bowl similar to what our text describes. The Greek *philiās* is a shallow bowl used for pouring libations; typically a broad, flat vessel.

*...full of the wrath of God*

These seven bowls are literally full of the wrath of God. The Greek *gemousas* means just that; it is a nautical term to describe a heavily laden ship, even swelled out by its cargo—we might say, loaded for bear. These bowls are each filled to the brim with God’s wrath. Let me repeat what I said earlier: I conclude that each “plague” represents the raw material, as it were, while God’s wrath represents the *force* behind it, supplying the lethal intensity. The “plagues” are the means by which the wrath of God is executed. Or, put a little differently, each angel’s plague is what God uses in His wrath against the earth.

v7B-8

...who lives forever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power; and no one was able to enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

I have associated the end of v7 with v8 because I believe they, together, make a cohesive statement. In fact I would also bring in v6 as part of that statement. Taken together, these passages—presented right before the pouring out of the last seven judgments—emphasize the right, the authority, and the power of a righteous and holy God to do what He is about to do.

*...who lives forever and ever.*

Because the Lord God is eternal, to have ultimate communion forever with His people He must expunge sin wherever it is—on and in the earth, in those who reject Him (by consigning them to an eternity of their own away from His presence), and even in those who *are* His (by changing each of them into a glorified state).

*And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power;*

The final, climactic imagery right before we descend into the pain and chaos of the seven bowls is of the temple's sanctuary filled with smoke. Repeatedly in God's word smoke is used to demonstrate the fierce power of God. It represents, in turn, His glory (as here in v8), His majesty, and His holiness—but none of these in a gentle, comfortable manner; it is meant to drive mere humans to their knees—in fear, worship, or both.

The first occurrence is at Mount Sinai when the people were ordered to gather around the base of the mountain so Yahweh could speak to them directly.

Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. (Exodus 19:18)

The effect upon the people of Israel?

All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die." (Exodus 20:18-19)

God employs smoke, as He does in v8, to declare, as it were, *I am God and you are not; I am holy and you are not*. Thus, as in 1 Kings 8:10-11, the Lord God uses smoke to express His glory—again, not in a gracious manner, but in a fierce, restrictive manner.

It happened that when the priests came from the holy place, the cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.

When the glory of God fills a space, there is no longer room for mere men.

Chapter Fifteen ends with a climactic statement about our holy, glorious God. He is just moments away from unleashing Act Three—the fiercest and concluding demonstration of His wrath upon the earth and upon those who have clung to their depravity through countless invitations and opportunities to repent.

The invitations are now at an end. The opportunities have now ceased. Now comes death and destruction, as described in Chapter Sixteen. Let us conclude with a profound statement by John MacArthur.

*MacArthur:* Once the wrath of God was poured out on Jesus Christ because of what He did for sinners; in the future, wrath will be poured out on sinners because of what they did to Jesus Christ... Mercy refused brings judgment.