

**WHEN THE WORSHIPPERS OF THE BEAST HARDEN THEIR HEARTS  
THEN GOD RESPONDS WITH THE SEVEN LAST PLAGUES -  
BUT THE WORSHIPPERS OF CHRIST ARE SAVE**

The last part chapter 14 was about the harvest of the earth and that gave us a picture of the way all things will end. Right now the human grain-fields are ripening and when the end comes then the Lord will gather the church into heaven. The wheat are the saved people of God and will live forever on the new heaven and earth. Then the weeds that grew alongside the wheat will be burnt to destruction. So at the end the people of the world will either end up on the new heaven and earth or in hell. It will depend on how they have responded to Christ.

In chapter 15 John sees another great and marvellous sign - seven angels with the seven last plagues. They are called last because with these plagues the wrath of God is completed. There is a touch of finality coming into these visions that John has been receiving from God. The end is in sight. We're also coming to the end of the book Revelation. The final chapters describe the complete fall of Babylon and conclude with a glorious description of the new Jerusalem.

However, we have learnt by now that this book Revelation does not give us a straight historical sequence of events and happenings. Chapter 15 speaks of things that are happening *before* the harvest of the earth takes place, of which chapter 14 speaks. We have seen a number of times that the visions in this book are like giant sweeps through history with each sweep giving us a look at different things. And we need to keep in mind that all these sweeps through time and history are taking place simultaneously. Our handicap, unlike God, is that we are not able to see all things at once.

Now what is this chapter 15 all about? Let us briefly get a bird's eye view of its contents. Have a look in your Bible - it's rather difficult to follow the preaching on Revelation without you looking at your Bible -- and see what it says on top of chapter 15. If you have the NIV then it says 'Seven angels with seven plagues.' These seven plagues are the same as the seven bowls of God's wrath which are described in the next chapter, 16. Chapter 15 merely announces them. The NJKV calls chapter 15 the prelude to the bowl judgments of chapter 16. Prelude means something that goes before something else.

So verse 1 merely mentions the seven last plagues without giving any further detail. Verse 2 talks about those who are victorious over the beast. And verses 3 and 4 speak about the victory song they sing. From verse 5 to the end of the chapter John is told about the seven angels who are given the seven bowls of God's wrath from which the seven plagues are poured.

Now that, briefly, is what this chapter 15 is about. What we need to do now is understand why God sends these seven plagues. It's clear that they are meant for those who worship the beast and we know who they are. Chapters 13 and 14 identify them. They are people who follow Satan in his opposition to Christ and His church. You may remember that they do this in mainly three ways. Open persecution is one way. Ridiculing the teaching of the Bible through false philosophies and false beliefs is another way. And a third way is by tempting Christians through the weakness of the flesh.

These are the three main ways in which the devil attacks the church of Jesus Christ in the world. He attacks the church as the beast from the sea, which stands for violent persecution. He does so again as the beast from the earth, which is the false prophet. And he also does it as the great prostitute Babylon, which is sexual seduction. Satan continuously uses these three forms to undermine Christ's work - brute force, captivating the mind with things that are false, and using the power of sex in a wrong way. In all this Satan makes evil look good and good look evil. Christians and their doctrines are seen as being a threat to the state and society. Humanism and secularism are held up as truth and biblical thinking is made to look old-fashioned nonsense. Same sex relationships and sex outside of marriage are said to be wholesome and good when love is present and the Bible's view of sexuality is said to be out of touch with the real world.

Now these are three main fronts the devil uses and it involves those who worship the beast. Some of Satan's followers may be ignorant of what they are really doing and would be most surprised if they were told. But others are very much aware of the dark forces they follow. They are openly against Christ and His church. It's a crusade to them. They worship their evil ways.

Let's now look at how all this works itself out through time and history. What I am now going to say is really a very brief overview of the book Revelation. After Pentecost, churches are established through the spread of the gospel. By the power of the Holy Spirit working through Christ's Word, people come out of spiritual darkness into the light of Christ. Churches who are true to Christ are lightbearers or lampstands in the midst of a world that lies in the darkness of sin. True churches are blessed with the continual presence and guidance of Christ. False churches that are not faithful to Christ are warned that unless they repent their light will go out. Chapters 1-3 are all about this.

But Christians bringing the gospel into all the world realise that many in the world resent the rule of Christ and the church's intrusion into their affairs. They attack the church and put Christians through trials and afflictions. It is the outworking of the seven seals. All this is mentioned in chapters 4-7.

God, however, stands up for His church in the world and the seven trumpets warn those who oppose Christ and persecute the church. These warnings come in the form of preliminary judgments and they call the followers of the beast to repentance. But many don't take any notice. They just carry on. The seven trumpets were described in chapters 8-11.

Then follow the seven signs in chapters 12 -14 and these are the attacks of Satan on the church in those three ways we mentioned earlier - open persecution, false teachings and sexual temptation.

Now what emerges out of the whole spiritual battle between God and Satan is this - the followers of the beast become more determined to resist Christ. There is a hardening of heart in those who stubbornly refuse to surrender to Christ the King. They become more set in their unbelieving ways. They recede further and further from the light of the gospel. And it is to these haters of God that God comes with the seven last plagues - last because with them God's wrath is completed. And this final coming of God in His holy wrath to these people, who just keep on defying Him, is what chapters 15 and 16 are about.

But you got to keep on remembering that there is no time sequence here. The seven churches, the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and now the seven last plagues, occur all the time throughout history. And we cannot always clearly tell when God's action is His seals, or His trumpets or His plagues. Sometimes it is clear. Take, for example, king Herod from the book of Acts. He persecuted Christians and threw Peter and John into prison. He was warned to repent and believe in Christ. He took no notice. Then he gave a public speech and the people shouted he was a god. He lapped this up and because he refused to give praise to God for anything, the Lord struck him down and he was eaten by worms and died [Acts 12:23]. Now in that man's life you can clearly see the outworking of God's seals - the king attacked the church. Then God warns him through His trumpets but he does not listen. Finally God kills him through His plagues. But we cannot always distinguish God's action as clearly as that. What may be a trumpet warning for one is for another a final plague.

In verse 3 the worshippers of Christ are singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb. All those who had been victorious over the beast sing it. They do not have the number of the beast, which, remember, is 666. The devil and His followers always stay on six. They love to get rid of Christ and climb on the throne themselves and become number seven, the number for completeness and perfection. But evil can't win and so they remain on six. But those who have turned to Christ, to follow Him, they are sealed by Him, they have His mark. They have Christ's Spirit in them and in Christ they have been made holy and righteous. You could say that they have reached number seven, through Christ, for He alone is fully complete and perfect.

That the church is pictured here in heaven with God means that the church has survived everything that the devil has thrown at her - persecution, his false prophets and his temptations of the flesh. None of it was able to take Christian believers away from Christ. Whilst they were in the world, God's seals, His trumpets and even the last plagues, were all taking place, but they made it through all that also. Christ defended them, stood up for them and kept them.

Now all the worshippers that make up the entire Christian church are standing beside the sea. Obviously not a real sea because they are in heaven around the throne of God. In Scripture the sea is often regarded as a place of danger. But the church has made it through. They are on other side of the sea. They are safely across. They are standing on shores of heaven.

There they sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb. But what has Moses got to do with all this? Let's recapture what we read from Exodus. What God did to Pharaoh is a bit similar to what He is doing for His church in these last days leading up to Christ's second coming. In Egypt God's covenant people suffered under the brutal repression of Pharaoh and they cried out to God to deliver them. And God did deliver them, through Moses His servant. At first God warned Pharaoh to let His people go. When that brought no results then God made the warnings stronger by sending the first of the ten plagues. But Pharaoh kept hardening his heart and God finally killed all the first-born in Egypt. This made Pharaoh admit defeat against God and he finally permitted the children of Israel to leave. But it wasn't long before his embittered heart regretted this. He changed his mind and went after them with a large army. God helped the Israelites escape through the Red Sea and He brought them safely to the other side. When Pharaoh and his army tried to follow then God made the waters of the sea roll back and they all drowned. When the Israelites saw the Egyptians floating to the shore like dead fish and their chariots had sunk beneath the waves, then Moses and his sister Miriam, led the people into singing a song of victory. It was a song of the saved. They gave glory, honour and praise to God.

Perhaps you and I would find it difficult to worship God with many dead bodies lying around. But in Old Testament times God often delivered His people from the devil in a violent and bloody way. But then came the cross where God again delivered His people, this time not by killing all His enemies, as He did to the Egyptians, but by sacrificing His own Son. Christ gave His life so that even God's enemies can be offered a pardon if they repented and believed in Christ. The Egyptians at the Red Sea received judgment and they died. Judgment was also there at Gogoltha but it came to Christ who stood in the place of the guilty.

In the song of Moses there are the words: "*The Lord is a man of war, the Lord is his name*" [Ex. 15:3]. When Jesus paid the price for our freedom the church began to sing: "For God so loved the world . . . love is His Name."

God is of course the same God. He saves because He loves and He executes judgment because He is righteous. And the enemy is the same. The anger of Pharaoh back then and the fury of the beast now reveal the cruelty of our enemy, Satan. He still needs to be defeated once and for all and Christ will do it. And all who love Christ must hate the beast and all it stands for.

And so the church of the redeemed sings again the song of deliverance just like Moses and Israel did long ago. Back then it was sung on the shore of the Red Sea, on the side where they were safe. When Christ has defeated the beast and its worshippers, then the church will again sing next to the sea through which they came, and again on the safe side. In fact, the church sings the song of chapter 15 now already:

*"Great and marvellous are Your deeds, Lord God Almighty.  
Just and true are Your ways, King of the Ages.  
Who will not fear You, O Lord, and bring glory to Your name?  
For You alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before You,  
for Your righteous acts have been revealed."*

But not all nations have come to bow before God. And not all God's righteous acts have been revealed. It will all take place at Jesus' coming. Yet we sing this song anyway, we sing it in faith. We believe it will all happen. So even though the church is still facing the dangers of the sea, yes, still caught up in God's trumpets and plagues on the earth, even now already we sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. It is the song of deliverance and the church gives the Lamb the praise.

And so with the assurance that all of Christ's followers will make it through the sea and be safe on the other side, let us briefly see the release of the seven last plagues on the followers of the beast. As the vision of the redeemed singing the song of the Lamb fades away, then John sees in heaven the temple, or more specific the tabernacle, which preceded the temple. In verse 5 it is called the tabernacle of the testimony, which are God's covenant promises and conditions. The tabernacle was very important to Israel because there God met with His people. It was also known as the tent of meeting. The tribe of Levi was appointed to look after the tabernacle. They camped around it and prevented just anyone from entering where they shouldn't. You could say that the certain areas of the tabernacle was for authorised personnel only. God is holy and pure and only those especially appointed were permitted to enter. The presence of God in the tabernacle could actually be seen because the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night rested on the tent. These symbolised God in the midst of His covenant people. The cloud and the fire pointed to God's holiness. The Old Testament says that the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle [Ex. 40:34,35].

John, in this vision of chapter 15, sees the tabernacle being opened. And out of it came the seven angels with the seven last plagues. It means to say that these angels came from God's presence. The angels were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels the seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives forever and ever. The tabernacle here in heaven was filled with smoke symbolising God's glory and power, and no one is to come near or enter the tabernacle until the seven plagues are completed.

It reminds us of Mt. Sinai where God gave Moses the ten commandments. No one else was allowed near the mountain whose top was covered in smoke. The people were filled with fear and well they might, for God revealed His might and terribleness. The angels' dazzling clothing as they came out of this heavenly tabernacle added to this awesomeness of God. So the whole scene is a really terrible thing to contemplate. May be for that reason alone John was first made to see the followers of Christ safely on the other side of the sea.

But what if you are not a follower of Christ? Or what if you are just a hanger-on? What if the trumpets of God, with their warnings, have had no effect on you? Then this scene that activates the seven last plagues must be frightening indeed. It is God with whom the followers of the beast have to deal. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, says the Bible [Heb. 10:31]. And God lives forever and ever.

Without Christ to cover for us, God is too big, too holy, too pure, and too just. But God ceases to frighten us when we have been pardoned and forgiven. The seven last plagues will not destroy those whose Saviour is Christ the Lord. In faith they can already see themselves standing on the other side of the sea. They will make it, for God is their Shield and Protector. Amen.

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