

## THE FIRST FIVE [OF THE SEVEN] BOWLS OF GOD'S WRATH

I would like to say six things about the bowls in chapter sixteen.

First of all, we are reminded of the ten plagues that God sent on Egypt. Children, who have the children's Bible read to them and look at drawings of these plagues, are always deeply impressed with what God can do. How powerful is God to be able to turn water into blood, bring frogs, gnats and flies in huge numbers, and give people painful sores!

When you are grown up and have a better understanding of the Bible, then you begin to realise that there is a great deal more to those ten plagues than what you saw as a child. You learnt from the Old Testament that God frequently reminded Israel throughout their generations that He is a powerful God who brought their forefathers out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. And for that reason God's covenant people may fully depend on Him for their salvation.

But the ten plagues do not only remind you of God's power and Him saving Israel from Pharaoh.. They also make you realise that God is a God to be feared. He does not let unrepentant sinners go unpunished. Moreover, you begin to see from the New Testament that God is still saving His people from oppression and slavery to sin. Similarly to what He did with Israel coming out of Egypt. You realise that Pharaoh, historically real, is also a type of any oppressive power that rises up against the rule of God and replaces His standards of truth and righteousness with evil and oppression.

Thus the destruction that came upon Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea is really a powerful reminder that God is the righteous Judge. Even though He is a wonderful God of love and mercy to those who repent and believe, He will one day bring judgment on an unrepentant world that steadfastly refuses to heed His warnings.

Therefore, the similarities between Revelation sixteen about the bowls of God's wrath and the ten plagues upon Egypt are clearly seen. We are made to realise that God will yet again deliver His people from the wicked and bring the church of Jesus Christ through the wilderness of sin and oppression into the new Canaan, the new heaven and earth.

Then secondly, we need to see the relation of these bowls of God's wrath to the seven seals and the seven trumpets. We need to see that relation when we try to figure out where to place these seven bowls in God's timetable? Some think that God pours them out in the very last days of history, but that view is not convincing. Mind you, the seventh bowl is about the final judgment at the end of time. And in the sermon on chapter 15 we already mentioned that the other six bowls also have a touch of finality about them. There is a certain build-up here. Just like the ten plagues on Egypt intensified, with the tenth being the climax. It's the same with these bowls of judgment, they build up towards the last judgment portrayed in the seventh.

However, generally speaking, the bowls are poured out in the last days and we have frequently stressed the point that the last days are the time period between Christ's ascension and second coming. But the bowls also cover the time before Christ's first coming. Their similarities to the ten plagues on Egypt already bring that out. And there were other times as well in Old Testament history where God's judgments were similar to what these bowls bring.

We are not to think, then, that these seven bowls follow on in time from the seven seals and the seven trumpets. The visions John sees in Revelation follow on from each other but in reality, what John sees in sequence is taking place simultaneously. It all has to do with God continually defending His church in the world.

As God comes to help His people then He releases the seals and the trumpets. And here we really have to learn to let God do it His way and not expect God to do it our way. First come the four horsemen and the world frequently experiences war. It's God bringing division among the temporal powers and thus He robs Satan of having an evil kingdom of unity. God makes the ungodly fight among themselves. You can see that with Islam, it is not united. You also see it in the western world, it too is not united. Third world countries are not united. They all squabble amongst themselves, even go to war and wars do a lot of harm.

Wars bring economic chaos, strife and death. We see this happening right now in the Middle East, in Iraq, in various African countries, and in numerous other places. In all this suffering God is already warning men about sin and unrighteousness.

Now when peoples and nations ignore warnings from God in the seven seals, and men continue to go their own way and defy God, then the trumpets come. Men are warned again, but now in natural disasters. The earth, sea, and rivers are affected and there are painful diseases. In the earthquakes, and catastrophes caused by the sea, and the pollution of the sweet waters of rivers, making people and animals sick, we must also see the hand of God. Remember, God is in control of the world and its people and nothing happens by chance. But when these trumpet warnings also go unheeded then God's final judgments come in the form of these seven bowls.

And amid all these warnings from God and their terrible consequences for the ungodly the church must not sit back and feel happy that the wicked are getting their just rewards. No, we must remember that God's warnings are meant to have sinners turn to God and thus the church is to bring the gospel to those who do not fear God. They must also hear that *"God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."* So it's not only the wrath of God that sinners experience but they must also hear of His love expressed in the cross. But when even God's own Son is rejected then the anger of God is fierce indeed.

In the third place, then, we see that these bowls are more final than the seals and the trumpets. The bowls are not new judgments but the same judgments, only stronger and more intense. And what may finally be a bowl of God's wrath for some may still be a trumpet warning for another.

So the same disaster can be a trumpet for some but a bowl for others. It can be like that for individuals but also for nations. Some nations in Africa today are brought to ruin and disaster because the rulers are full of greed and corruption. God's hand of judgment is there in their destruction. But at the same time other nations are warned by that to not go that way.

And the bowls are definitely worse. The seven seals only affected a fourth part of the earth and the trumpets a third. The bowls are final and total.

In the fourth place let's briefly look at the first five bowls. And remember, it is God who initiates the action here. A loud voice from the temple, probably God's voice, commands the angels to pour out the bowls of God's wrath.

The first bowl causes loathsome and painful sores to come on those who have the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. Those who serve the kingdom of Satan are finally afflicted with diseases for which there is no cure. Remember that one of the ten plagues on the Egyptians was boils. And when Israel was about to enter Canaan, God promised blessings if they obeyed Him but curses if they disobeyed Him. One of His warnings said this: *"The Lord will afflict you with the boils of Egypt and with the tumours, festering sores and the itch, from which you cannot be cured"* [Deut. 28:27]. And the Lord Jesus warned that among the signs of the end of the age, such as earthquakes and famines, there will also be pestilences in various places [Lk.21:11]. Pestilences. Here we have to think of AIDS.

AIDS is a current disease for which to date there is no cure. We have learnt to not rashly judge someone having AIDS because it could have been given them through a transfusion of infected blood. But the fact remains that AIDS is a disease that results from sexual practices that God has said are sinful. God has always warned those who pervert His gift of sex will not go unpunished. But a person dying of AIDS can still be saved when there is repentance and faith in Jesus. We may hope and pray that AIDS may be curable one day, as we do with many other incurable diseases. And God in His mercy may give the cure. But it would be sheer folly for people to think they can sleep around again as much as they want when AIDS is no longer a killer. God will continue to send other diseases to warn the wicked that sinful lifestyles are not immune from His holy justice.

It's sound terrible, doesn't it - God sending diseases to kill people. It seems the wrong thing to say about God. Until one remembers that God sent the ten plagues to end Egypt's brutal oppression of the Israelites. And that God sent the great flood to end a people who could only think and do evil. And that God brought death to the people in Canaan who were so wicked that they burnt their firstborn to death in an act of false worship to gods of wood and stone. And that God brought the captivity on His own people Israel after years

of forsaking Him. And that God destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70 because they had rejected His Son who had come to save them. Yes, it seems wrong that God punishes people with death, until one remembers that God is absolutely holy and has always said that sin brings death. He warned about that already in paradise. That God is the Judge of all the earth is as true as Him being loving and merciful.

Yet we still struggle sometimes with the way God works because God also gave Job loathsome and painful sores, and Job, says the Bible, was an upright man. As you know, innocent people also contract AIDS. And Christians die of incurable diseases. So how do we cope with that?

Well, we're not the first ones to question God about this. The Israelites did it already when they heard God would send them into exile. God told His prophets to remind them of a few things. Isaiah, for example, had to say this about God:

*"I am God, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness. I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things" [45:7].*

*"Woe to him who quarrels with His Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?'" [vs.9].*

When God said this He was sending His people into captivity in order to purify them from their sins. They didn't like that. And Job did not like what God did to him. But the Israelites learnt through their painful experience that other gods are false and cannot help. They also learnt that God who is so righteous is also a Saviour [vs.21] of His people and will not shame or disgrace them forever [vs.17]. And Job, after all what God did to him, learnt humility and that in his sinful human nature he wasn't as innocent as he assumed at the beginning of his trials.

So as Christians we need to go back to not just one or two but all the teachings of Scripture about God and man. When you and I are also affected by the seals, the trumpets and the bowls, then that is not a mistake on the part of God. The sins of the wicked also have consequences on the saved. An adulterous husband can infect a believing wife with AIDS. Christians also die when terrorists kill many. In fact, at one stage when we were still unsaved, we also contributed to the sinfulness of society. Even as Christians we at times fall back into the sins of the world. Now God does not punish the saved as He does the stubborn unsaved. Christ has died for all the sins of the saved because all the fires of God's judgment on their sin fell on Christ. But in this world the saved still die in the body and often sickness and pain precede death. For the unsaved all that may be a judgment from God but for the saved the same trial and affliction can be a blessing. Yes, trials and afflictions bring suffering, as some of you well know. But God uses them to help the Christian depend on God more and increases one's faith and trust in the Lord. The apostle Paul was not very happy about his thorn in the flesh, yet he could say that it forced him away from independence to dependence on God. For the saved God makes all things work for their spiritual good.

With all this in mind we can now be much briefer with the other bowls. The second bowl turns the sea into blood. Not life-giving, life-sustaining blood. But blood as in a dead man. It does no good anymore. It's foul. Every living thing in the sea died. The sea turning into blood - is that meant symbolically or literally? We don't really know. Jesus did warn that one of the signs pointing to the end of the age is the roaring and tossing of the sea [Lk.21:25]. The Psalms often symbolise the sea as an instrument of destruction.

The third bowl affects fresh water, and therefore, drinking water. It too turns into blood. It was also the first plague on Egypt when God turned the river Nile into blood. God denies the wicked one of the necessities of life - fresh water.

With the fourth bowl men are scorched from the burning sun. Fires erupt, searing people with intense heat. God placed the sun in the heavens to give light and light is necessary for growth. The sun governs the day and determines the seasons of the year. People cannot live without the sun. It's another necessity of life. But this plague turns the blessing of the sun into a curse.

The fifth bowl strikes at the very throne of Satan. The first four bowls were judgments of God in the realm of nature. They affect the earth, the sea, the rivers and springs of water, and the sun. The fifth plague, however, strikes at Satan himself. Darkness descends as with the ninth plague on Egypt and plunges Satan's kingdom into darkness.

Where does Satan have his kingdom? Where does he rule? It's wherever wickedness prevails. It's wherever the good laws of God are resisted. It's wherever persecution seeks to crush the church, where

false philosophies and religions seek to destroy the Christian faith. Where sinful lust twists the normal desires of people. Satan's kingdom is godless society. It's the world of secularism and humanism. It's the opposite of the kingdom of Christ where there is light truth and righteousness. But the fifth bowl plunges that ungodly world into darkness and the world of Satan no longer knows where it is going. Confusion, division, and fear is the result. It is a foretaste of the conditions of hell.

In the fifth place we must just pick up from this chapter the references to God being true and just in His judgments. God's just judgments are emphasised here because people frequently accuse God of injustice. Look at verses 5, it says: "*You are just in these judgments, you who are and were, the Holy One, because you have so judged.*" We've already spoken about how Christians can cope when God's bowls of wrath affect them. But what about people who are not Christian and, as verse six says: "*they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets*".

The bowls of God's wrath very much affect those who persecute Christians and harm God's church, and verse 7 repeats verse 5 when it says: "*Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are Your judgments.*"

It's really the teaching of Jesus' parable about the tenants. God is the landowner and His world the vineyard. People may work in His vineyard but God asks that they respect Him and give Him worship and praise. But many refuse. God sent His servants the prophets to warn them to serve Him but God's messengers are killed. Finally God sent His Son, they can still be saved through Him. But the Son too is killed and the people of the world think that by rejecting Christ they have finished with that silly Bible and its message and claim the whole world as their own. It's our world, they say, it's our life, and we decide by what laws we want to live.

In response God judges these people and He is true and right in this. It's when we see the sinfulness of sin, the holiness of God, and how some reject His offer of salvation in Christ, that we understand why God acts as He does. God, who is really infinitely patient and loving, finally says it is enough.

The sixth and final point we pick up from this chapter is the refusal to repent when repentance and forgiveness are proclaimed. After the fourth bowl was poured out, the one where the sun scorched people with fire, they "*cursed the name of God who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him*" [vs.9]. And with the fifth plague plunging the kingdom of Satan into darkness, it says that "*Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done*" [v.11].

So God who can save them with the gospel is cursed. There can't be a greater folly than that. The divine hand of grace that can pull sinners out of the fire is knocked away with stubborn defiance. They know their sin but they refuse to repent of what they have done.

What do we do with people like that? They suffer because of what God is doing to them. But they don't want to see that. They remain defiant and continue to say and think terrible things about God. You and I might know of people like that. They might be relatives. People we love to see saved. What can we do?

We must really believe these bowls of God's wrath, even if they don't. And we must warn them with boldness and urgency, in the hope that they can still be saved. When you know that a great disaster is about to happen, then you're not going to just stand around and do nothing. When you see a shark where surfers are, when you know the dam is about to break, when a bushfire is racing towards your neighbourhood, then you'll be rushing about to make sure everyone gets out of the way before it's too late. With that same urgency we must tell the lost to come to Christ before the fires of God's judgment engulf them completely. Amen.

M P Geluk

Gosnells, 18 July, 2004