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## ***Into Thy Word Bible Study in Revelation***

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### **Revelation 16:1-11: “The First Bowls of God’s Wrath”**

**General idea:** John continues to get his incredible glimpse of the hope and wonder we will get for eternity. Now he hears a shout to the seven angels to go and empty the bowls of God’s wrath, and they are being poured out. The first bowl gives horrible pain and sores upon the wicked who refused Christ and took the mark of the beast. They received what they deserved, as they showed their disloyalty and contempt for God and those who are faithful. Then, the second angel poured out his bowl and the sea became dead along with every thing in it. The third angel had his turn and did the same to the rivers. Now, the angel who was in charge of the earths waters agreed and said these judgments were just displaying his trust in God when all that he was in charge of was wiped out. He further testifies that the evils and unfaithfulness of God’s people and His creation of humanity judged themselves and thus doomed themselves. God is only giving them what they wanted and deserved.

The fourth angel pours out his bowl upon the sun and it becomes more intense and scorches the earth; what is left is not burned up. Under intense judgment, the people still refuse to repent and seek God’s love and grace; they become even more belligerent and curse His Holy name! Saying what is good is evil and what is evil is good seems to be the everlasting work of Satan and evil people. So, the fifth angel pours out God’s wrath upon the beast and his minion of evil and the anguishes and pains of judgment are felt. However, responsibility is not heeded and repentance is still not sought. Indeed, God is patient and just!

**Vs. 1-11, Contexts:** This passage continues the theme of judgment and uses the imagery of the plagues God poured on Egypt, where Pharaoh was offered an easy way out and grace, but he hardened his heart and refused to repent just as the recipients of the bowls of wrath do. Then, God warns the Jews to be loyal; if they are not, He will inflict them of the boils and plagues He did to Egypt (Deut. 28: 25-29). In contrast, this is also about how God protected His people from the plagues and judgments; thus, this passage is also about great comfort to others in persecution. This is in relation to the love and forgiveness of God being offered but then refused by those who need it the most. They sought to deliver themselves but they failed; instead of reaching for God, they cursed Him instead. The contrasting aspect here is that God’s provision and grace can be received and He will protect the faithful from His wrath just as He demonstrated in Egypt. We can take comfort in God’s love and protection and not fear His Judgment when we are in Him. But, we need to also take heed; God will not tolerate disloyalty and being cursed! This is about “what goes around comes around;” what we sow, we will, in return, reap. Our attitudes and ideas will result in the application of our deeds and actions. In other words, as this Book has been

saying, we bring judgment upon ourselves by what we do and refuse to do. So, do not sin; but if we do, we must repent, seek, and accept His love and forgiveness. If we do not repent, we will be in our own “darkness” where there is the absence of peace and contentment. These bowls of God’s wrath are brought upon those who are evil and who seek after those who are evil. We can be reassured that there is no need for a Christian to fear God’s wrath; if you are not evil and manipulative and are loyal to Christ, you have no qualms to bear or reason to fear (Is. 57:15-21; 59:1-21; Rev. 15:1-16:21).

### **Word and Phrase Meanings:**

- *Seven angels.* This comes from an ancient Jewish belief system, not from Scripture. They believed that angels had control over elements and were assigned positions by God. This may be true or not, an image John uses to make his point, or a metaphor for the elements and behavior of nature that God controls and directs (Psalm 148:1-12; Zech. 6:5; Rev. 7:1).
- *Pour out...God's wrath.* The Bowls, in conjunction with God's wrath, may be symbolic referring to God's judgment and not necessarily a specific attack plan although God can do as He pleases so this could be literal. This theme is used heavily in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Far more important than the specifics or theories of how God will do this is the point that God will have His reckoning, that judgment is coming, and that it will be a reality. However, as Christians who trust in Him, we have hope and assurance through Christ and His righteousness (Is. 59:15-18; Joel 2:11; Mal. 3:2-10).
- *On the earth/land* is a contrast of the first four bowls with the first four trumpets, referring to death (Rev. 8:7-12; 11:6; 17:15).
- *Bowl* is an image of God's action and His holiness in so doing, which simply means as this passage says, “God is pouring out.” These bowls are nothing esoteric or cryptic; they symbolize God's wrath. It is not necessary to take this to mean literal, giant basins. It is a Jewish image of the Temple and the precious instruments and utensils used for worship. The point is, just as God delivered the Israelites from oppression using the plagues against Egypt, so will He deliver those who are His! This is also a call for us to be fragrant and poured out to our Lord, for that is what pleases Him. What does not please Him is our disobedience and refusal of His love (Deut 33:10; Psalm 141:1-3; Gal. 2:20-21; Phil. 3:1-14; Rev. 8:3-4).
- *Ugly and painful/Noisome and grievous/loathsome.* Obviously something painful, it also means bad, evil (from context, not that God is doing evil), and harmful, and then serious and painful, from whence we get our word “malignant.”

- *Sores/boils broke out.* Means “ulcer;” this is reminiscent of the sixth plague of Egypt (Ex. 9:8-12; Job 2:7-8, 13; Luke 16:21).
- *Bowl on the sea...Rivers and springs.* This is reminiscent of the first plague of Egypt (Ex. 7:20-21; Rev. 8:8). The term used means the ultimate destiny of mankind as being judged and the preparation for the Second Coming and/or the Last Judgment, similar or the same as the “Trumpet” judgments in Rev. 8:6-13. This is called “eschatological;” it is from God and His judgment, not necessary from the pollution from man’s industrial machine. Volcanic upheavals can also produce this effect from God’s direction. (see Revelation chap 6 notes; Is. 15:9; Psalm 78:44; 2 Pet. 3:10-12; Rev. 6:13; 8:10-11; 9:1).
- *Every living thing/souls.* This is where we get “psych,” the Greek concept of mind and body and soul and/or the vital, living force of a person from which come our personality and expressions. Hence, the word is used for “psychology.” Thus, everything in the sea died—complete destruction.
- *Holy One/Lord.* “Greek “kyrios” is the word used and usually translated as Lord; however, here it is “hosios” meaning “holy,” thus *holy* is the correct translation.
- *You are just* means God’s ways are pure and without fault of any sort. God is never vindictive for reason of spite, but to defend His faithful, He seeks “payment” to remove sin. This is a Hebrew call of the oppressed seeking God’s mercy and judgment upon the oppressor. It is a plea for vindication by also praising God for Who He is. This is seen in the Psalms, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Thus, this angel/theme agrees with God; His ways are best, regardless of personal cost (Ex. 3:14; Rev. 15:3; 19:2-11).
- *Have shed the blood of your saints.* Jewish tradition says that God turned the Nile into blood as punishment for shedding the blood of the children from which Moses escaped. This also refers to those who have been martyred because they remained faithful to Christ. It denotes suffering, injustice, and persecution, but the application is that they remained true to the faith, regardless of circumstances. In context, this image indicates that the martyrs are like sacrifices, just as Christ was when he represented the Passover Lamb, innocent and undeserving, whose blood was shed. In Christ’s case, it was for our redemption; in the case of the martyrs, it was seemingly in vain, but in reality, it glorified God (Pseudepigrapha book, Wisdom of Solomon chaps.16-17; Phil. 2:6-11).
- *Given them blood to drink.* This is also reminiscent of the first plague of Egypt (Ex. 7: 14-24; 9:10) and is a metaphor for shedding blood and the blood crying out for justice and vengeance. (Apocrypha book, Tobit 3; Rev. 6:9).

- *As they deserve/worthy* means “befitting.” It is not a commendation (praise) but rather a condemnation (a sentence to punishment) as “they deserve it.” This is also a saying that the wicked will fall by their own hand and means, or God will just wait and let the wicked destroy themselves. It also means “the punishment fits the crime.” God has the right to destroy what He created and does not need or is obligated to save; what He does anyway for us is offer Grace to us all who do not deserve it. However, the grace must be received and repentance must come forth. If no repentance, judgment is more than just and completely and totally appropriate (Isa. 49:26; Matt. 23:31-36).
- *The altar respond* means “personified” as the witness of the altar of God’s temple, as a means to make oaths and swear by. Also means the witness and integrity of people who are righteous or how they were sacrificed as being an altar to God (Deut. 29:19-21; Rev. 6:9). The *altar* itself refers to the blood from the slaughtered animals of the Old Testament sacrificial ritual, as the blood is drained out from the base of the altar (Ex. 29:12; Lev. 4:7-25, 24; 5:9; 8:15; 9:9; Matt. 5:33-36; Luke 1:11).
- *God Almighty* is a name for God, and refers that He, as God, is strong and mighty and rules all things, meaning His supremacy and preeminence over all the universe (2 Cor. 6:18).
- *Sun was given power to scorch... fire.* Heat and fire were feared by the ancients. This was also a terrifying image of judgment, from the suffering of heat of the fire the laborers felt to especially the “siroccos,” the hot, east winds that destroyed crops and sometimes people too. Interestingly, this was not one of the plagues of Egypt (Ex. 13:21; Deut. 28:22; Psalm 121:6; 1 Cor. 3:13; Heb. 12:29; 2 Pet. 3:7).
- *Refused to repent.* Just as with the Trumpet plagues, these people are “stupid” and have no excuse. They had some warning, either by prophets, by the clear teaching of the Word, or by some supernatural pronouncement. They knew their deeds were wrong, yet they refused to acknowledge Christ or repent of their ways even in the face of catastrophes. In addition, they cursed the name of God. However, if they repented, they would be spared their calamities, yet they refused... talk about being *hardheaded* (Ex. 7:22-23; 8:10; 9:14-29; 10:2; 14:4; Amos 4:6-11; Rev. 2:14; 9:21 chaps 10-11; 16:9-11)!
- *Bowl on the throne of the beast* may be referring to Satan's throne. *Throne* appears 42 times in Revelation. The other 40 references are to the throne of God (Rev. 2:13; 6:15-17; 16:10).
- *Plunged into darkness.* This is reminiscent of the ninth plague of Egypt that was more than a lack of light; it was “felt.” This “darkness” also refers to having no peace, contentment, or happiness, as chasing evils and pleasure

even when our wants and agendas only leave us destitute of what is really important—His presence (Ex. 10:21-23; Is. 59:1-15)!

- *Cursed the God of heaven* refers that people will replace evil for good and visa versa, as in praising Satan and cursing God. This is an aspect of hedonism—to manipulate a sin into a right. This is the very core of irreverence and blasphemy. God is Sovereign; He loves, gives grace and mercy, and yet will destroy wicked kingdoms. He who created and established His universal and eternal reign will not be cursed. God takes false worship and contempt very severely and seriously (Dan. 2:44; Rom 1:28-32; James 1:12-18; 4:1-4; Rev. 16:11)!

### **Thoughts and Applications:**

Real repentance will demand our complete, authentic profession of faith and the turning away of our sin. This will show restitution, and the will to turn to Christ, not just as Savior, but also as Lord over all that we are and all that we want to be. To grow in our faith requires us to surrender our will and sin over to Him (Gal. 2:20-21). This means we surrender our ways of thinking, our desires, outlooks, pretences, agendas, and worldviews that are not based on His precepts and life so we can grasp His precepts and live the life He has for us that is wondrous and fulfilling. We give up what we think is worthy, that is ultimately unfulfilling for His worthiness; our sin is exchanged for His righteousness given to us. Then, we will be an offering to Christ and a showcase of His work to others. This process is ongoing and will last all the days we walk this earth; Christ will empower us with His Spirit to do so. So, what have you done to receive Him and remain faithful? Nothing of good can come from those who refuse Christ or repentance, and nothing will change a defiant heart, as this passage demonstrates.

### **The Four Prevailing Views**

**The Preterist view:** Basically there are two views. One view is that all of Revelation deals with the early church and fall of Jerusalem. Others see the first half of the Book of Revelation as dealing with Jerusalem, and the last half as dealing with Rome. Chapters 15 and 16 are considered “half way.” Most in this camp see this passage as the judgments against Jerusalem for their sins of killing the faithful. Others in this camp see this having to do with the fall of Rome in the fifth century. Some see this as the results of the Trumpet judgments in chapter eight. The *Mark of the beast* are the loyal citizens of Rome or apostate Jews and God’s warning to them in Deut. 28 being fulfilled. Some see these as symbolic; others as literal past happenings. Others see this as the plagues that infested Jerusalem during and after the siege by the Romans, because of all the piled up dead bodies and resulting diseases, and the pollution of the water. Hence, the imagery of blood and plagues. Some see this as further details of the

Trumpet plagues while others as a different judgment. The difference is the Trumpets were 1/3 and the bowls are full on. The *altar* refers to the saints calling out for vengeance. The sun's *heat* is seen as symbolic for the persecutors of the sinful Jewish leaders. The throne of the *beast* is seen as Rome, and *darkness* is seen as the resulting political turmoil in Rome after Nero commits suicide.

**The Futurist view:** They see this passage as judgments that come quickly in sequence, or all at once as the consummation of God's judgment at the close of the tribulation period. These are different from the Trumpet judgments but follow a similar succession. Most see this as a literal depiction of these events while others see some of these events as symbolic. All see these as literal *plagues* just like the ones poured out on Egypt, except far more devastating or completely destroying the earth. Most see the *first bowl* as effects of nuclear war and natural catastrophes that God allows to come in their fruition for His purpose. The *second bowl* is seen as the sea representing the Gentiles and the judgment upon them or that the sea is literally wiped out. The *third bowl* is mostly seen as symbolic to how devastating it is, but literal as how blood-thirsty the evildoers are. Most do not see the blood as literal rather what it looked like or symbolic to how awful it is, but not to minimize the literal destruction. The *fourth bowl* is seen as the ruling secular authorities getting their judgment while others see this as literal "astrometric" disasters. The *fifth bowl* is seen as the end of the *Beast's* political power and or influences. There is a lot of speculation concerning how Russia or China will attack Israel and/or the United States, or about a nuclear war. But, according to Scripture, these things, although they may occur, have no real bearing on the second coming of Christ or His timing. They just may mean "birth pains" to His coming. The failure to *repent* and apostasy are the reasons for these judgments.

**The Idealist view:** They see this passage as God Himself ordering the angels and judgments that resemble the plagues of Egypt. The contrast is that Satan operates just like evil dictators, personified by Pharaoh's oppressive regime and domination of the Israelites, and God's subjugated judgments upon him and his rule. The other contrast is over the Trumpet judgments that affect 1/3 of the earth; these plagues bring total devastation. Some see these as parallel and literal while others as symbolic that calamity is certain if you do not repent. Some see this as the fall of Rome; others to how God deals with the apostate Church as well as individuals. In between these two sets of judgments, the Trumpet and *Bowl* judgments gave abundant opportunity for repentance, but the wicked refused and brought judgment upon themselves. The other aspect of this passage is that it brings comfort to the persecuting Christians to whom John was writing. The sea is seen as humanity and the possible total devastation this may mean—the finality of humanity. The *altar* is seen as the prayers of the saints crying out for vindication.

**The Historicist view:** They see this passage as the last judgment on the corrupt papacy prior and during the reformation. Others see this as the civil wars and

calamities of mankind in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and/or today. The *mark* of the beast here is seen as those loyal to and helping the evil Popes in the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Others just see this as describing the reign of Napoleon and then the French revolution of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (24,000 priests were killed during this time and many churches were destroyed too! Such a view is perhaps a “micro” application of the passage but not necessarily an actuality or verbatim of what it teaches us or what John saw). The *sea* into *blood* is seen as the removal of the papacies navel power and/or the changing political and naval powers of Europe due to war during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The *rivers* are seen as the changing political landscape as borders and countries changed rapidly during this time climaxing with WWI. *Blood* is a symbolic for the papal persecutions of the righteous and the Reforming Church. The *throne of the Beast* is seen as papal Rome and the various wars over and with the Vatican from 1797 to 1798. Others see it as from 1794 through 1848, and world history during this time.

***The Essential Inductive Questions*** (for more Inductive questions see [Inductive Bible Study](#)):

1. What does this passage say?
2. What does this passage mean?
3. What is God telling me?
4. How am I encouraged and strengthened?
5. Is there sin in my life for which confession and repentance is needed?
6. How can I be changed, so I can learn and grow?
7. What is in the way of these precepts affecting me? What is in the way of my listening to God?
8. How does this apply to me? What will I do about it?
9. What can I model and teach?
10. What does God want me to share with someone?

***Additional Questions:***

1. How would you symbolize these Bowls? Have you ever been through a natural disaster?
2. How does a defiant heart only bring pain, chaos, strife, disillusionment, dysfunction, discouragement, distress, and grief? How have you seen this in your own life?
3. How have you experienced that God indeed is patient and just? What would cause Christians not to heed responsibility and repentance? How would such people excuse themselves? What does God think? How does this affect your church?

4. How have you seen people curse God? What about disloyalty and contempt toward God? How do those who are faithful do such things? What about you? How have you done so? Deeds, words, not obeying, etc.?
5. What does it mean to display trust in God when all that we have or are in charge of could be wiped out?
6. How is there hope and assurance for you when your trust is in Christ and His righteousness? How can there be?
7. Why would a person under intense judgment, knowing that their ways accrued God's judgment, still refuse to repent and seek God's love and grace? Why would they become belligerent and curse His Holy name?
8. Why do you suppose God did not pour out His wrath upon the beast and his minion of evil first?
9. Why does God take false worship very severely and seriously? How can this help motivate you to make sure you and your church's motives are right? What would be wrong motives? What are right motives? What are you going to do now?
10. Real repentance will demand our complete, authentic, profession of faith and the turning away from our sin. How can you do this? What can your church do to model and teach this? How can you demonstrate restitution? What does it mean to you that Christ will empower you with His Spirit to do so?
11. What can you do to learn what causes the breakdown of society and even apostasy in the church? How can your church warn and prepare people?
12. How have you seen what is good as evil and what is evil as good displayed in your society and experiences? What about in the Church? What can your church do to combat these tendencies?