

Christ, Plagues, and Promises

Revelation 16

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In the prophecies of the book of Revelation, God reveals an outline of end-time events to inform His people of what is coming so they can be prepared in advance. As Jesus said to His disciples, “I have told you before it comes, that when it does come to pass you may believe” (John 14:29). Revelation 16 outlines the completion of God’s wrath against sin—the seven last plagues (Revelation 15:1). These are the final scenes on earth before the coming of Jesus.

There are similarities between the seven last plagues (Revelation 16) and the seven last plagues (Revelation 8, 9), but with increased intensity under the plagues. The first four trumpets result in a third of the trees being burned up, a third of the sea becoming blood, and a third of the living things in the sea dying, a third of the fresh water becoming bitter, and the light from the sun, moon, and stars being reduced by a third (Revelation 8:7-12). The seven last plagues cause *all* water—the oceans and the rivers and streams—to turn to blood, *all* living things in the sea to die, and *great* darkness (Revelation 16:3, 4, 10)..

Before we look at each of the seven plagues in detail, let’s consider the Old Testament context from which they are drawn. The Exodus from Egypt was the event that created Israel as a people with a shared history. God’s deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt was seen by them as the greatest example of His redemptive power. When Pharaoh refused God’s demand to let His people go free, God sent ten plagues upon the land of Egypt (Exodus 7-9). These plagues are a parallel to the seven last plagues that will fall on sinners at the end of time:

- Plagues fell on Egypt; Israel was freed from slavery as a result, and God led them to the Promised Land.
- Likewise, plagues will fall on the beast power and its followers at the end of time; God’s people will be delivered as a result, and God will lead them to the Promised Land of heaven.

With that background, let’s look at these plagues as outlined in Revelation 16.

First Plague—Loathsome Sores

So the first [angel] went and poured out his bowl upon the earth, and a foul and loathsome sore came upon the men who had the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image (Revelation 16:2).

Notice that this plague falls on those “who had the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image.” From this, we can draw two conclusions. First, the plagues fall only on the wicked, not on the righteous. Second, humanity has been divided into two groups—the wicked and the righteous—when the plagues begin. Let’s break these conclusions down further.

Only the first plague specifically states that it falls on the wicked. Can we conclude that the same is true of all seven? Although the specific statement is made only in connection with the first plague, mention is made repeatedly throughout the seven that the recipients of the plagues blaspheme God and do not repent of their sins. Deceived by Satan through the beast, an end-time religious/political power, humanity will continue to defy and blaspheme God even as the seven last plagues fall on them.

There is no mention of the righteous suffering from the plagues. The implication is that the plagues fall only on the wicked. If that is so, then clearly every person on earth has been determined to be either in one group or the other—wicked or righteous—at the time the plagues begin to fall. This tells us that probation has closed at this time. Everyone on earth has made a final choice—to worship God and keep His commandments or worship the beast power opposed to God. Those who have knowingly chosen to give their allegiance to the beast will be recipients of the seven last plagues.

The first plague consists of a “loathsome sore.” Revelation doesn’t elaborate further. In the ten plagues that fell on Egypt, the sixth plague was boils and sores. In the Egyptian plagues, the first three fell on the Israelites and the Egyptians alike. The last seven, however, afflicted only the Egyptians. So the Israelites did not suffer the boils and sores of the sixth plague.

Are the seven last plagues literal calamities that afflict human beings or are they symbolic? Some have seen symbolic imagery in these plagues, but Revelation 16 gives no indication that these are symbolic rather than literal. Certainly, the plagues that fell on Egypt were real, literal

calamities. The evidence seems to indicate that although there may be some symbolic significance to these plagues, they also are real events that befall those who have rejected God.

Second Plague—The Sea Turns to Blood

Then the second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it became blood as of a dead man, and every living creature in the sea died (Revelation 16:3).

Again, this verse offers no further details about this plague. Those who favor a symbolic interpretation of the plagues point out the difficulties involved in assuming that the oceans of the world literally become blood, killing every living organism in them. They suggest that since waters elsewhere in Revelation symbolize nations and multitudes of people (Revelation 17:15) the oceans turning to blood under this plague might be interpreted to mean worldwide bloodshed and strife involving multitudes of people.

Those favoring a literal interpretation point to red-algae blooms and microorganisms in the ocean that cause the death of marine life by the millions by depriving them of the oxygen they need to survive. They also emphasize the toxic waste currently being dumped into the world's oceans that are threatening the upset the delicate balance necessary for their survival.

Whatever is involved in the second plague, it will be much worse and far greater than anything taking place in the world's oceans today.

Third Plague—Rivers Turn to Blood

Then the third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood. And I heard the angel of the waters saying, "You are righteous, O Lord, the One who is and who was and who is to be, because You have judged these things. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink, for it is their just due." And I heard another from the altar saying, "Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments" (Revelation 16:4-7).

Water turning to blood was also one of the plagues that God sent on the Egyptians (Exodus 7:17).

According to a symbolic interpretation of the plagues, this third plague means that the worldwide bloodshed of multitudes under the second plague will extend to even smaller groups and more remote areas of the world. A literal interpretation would see rivers and streams becoming infected by the environmental pollution that has caused havoc with the oceans.

In reference to this third plague, John heard an angel saying, “You are righteous, O Lord . . . for they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink” (verse 6). These words can also be understood in terms of either a symbolic or literal interpretation of the plagues—continued bloodshed around the world or an actual lack of drinking water. Either would be a just retribution for those who have persecuted God’s people to the death and shed their blood. The words of this angel (and the one in verse 7) vindicate the justice and righteousness of God’s judgments in the plagues that fall on the wicked.

Some commentators point to similarities here with the experience of Elijah during the three-year drought God brought on Israel for its sins. As the waters dried up, God preserved Elijah’s life at the Brook Cherith, with water from the brook and food delivered by ravens (1 Kings 17:1-6). During the third plague, the wicked have no water to drink, but God promises His people bread to eat and that they will have water to drink (Isaiah 33:16). Just as God took care of Elijah during the calamity, so God will care for His people during the plagues. Elijah was taken to heaven without dying. Likewise, those who have the seal of the living God (Revelation 7:1-4) will be taken to heaven without dying when Jesus returns.

Fourth Plague—Scorching Heat from the Sun

Then the fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and power was given to him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat, and they blasphemed the name of God who has power over these plagues; and they did not repent and give Him glory (Revelation 16:8, 9).

Some point to the effects of climate change as present-day indicators of how this plague could affect humanity as earth’s temperatures rise. Ultraviolet radiation has increased

significantly in recent years as the ozone layer of earth's atmosphere is degraded. These, however, are more gradual phenomena. The fourth plague comes from God as a judgment upon sin and sinners. Those scorched by the unnatural heat from the sun "blasphemed the name of God . . . and they did not repent and give Him glory." The plagues comes as judgments against sin and sinners who have made an irreversible choice—not as a chastisement designed to bring them back to God.

God's people are spared the scorching heat that torments the wicked. The psalmist wrote:

He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High, shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him I will trust." He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge. . . . A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand; but it shall not come near you. Only with your eyes shall you look and see the reward of the wicked (Psalm 91:1, 2, 4, 7, 8).

Fifth Plague—Darkness and Pain

Then the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom became full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues because of the pain. They blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and did not repent of their deeds (Revelation 16:10, 11).

This plague strikes directly at the "throne of the beast." The beast power has kept people in spiritual darkness, and now darkness descends on it. Light comes from God; there is no darkness in Him (1 John 5). Jesus is the Light of the world, so spiritual darkness falls upon those who reject Him. John wrote in his Gospel:

In Him [Jesus Christ] was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it . . . That was the true Light [Jesus Christ] which gives light to every man coming into the world. He was in the world, . . . and the world did not know Him (John 1:4-10).

God's Word could have brought light to those in spiritual darkness under the reign of the beast. "The entrance of Your words gives light" (Psalm 119:130). But instead of searching for light, the apostate church tampered with God's law and kept the light of the Word from the people. Darkness and pain is the result.

Darkness was the ninth of the ten plagues that fell on the Egyptians for Pharaoh's refusal to recognize God and obey Him (Exodus 10:21-29).

Sixth Plague—Euphrates River Dried Up

Then the sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, so that the way of the kings from the east might be prepared. And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. For they are the spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them together to the battle of that great day of God Almighty. . . . And they gathered them together to the place called in Hebrew, Armageddon" (Revelation 16:12-16).

The sixth plague dries up the river Euphrates to prepare the way for the kings from the east. This is reminiscent of the sixth trumpet, where that angel is told to "release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." So the four angels . . . were released to kill a third of mankind" (Revelation 9:14, 15). Several times in the Old Testament drying up waters is associated with the power of God. It was so at the Exodus and the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21). God also miraculously parted the Jordan River so that the Israelites could cross over into Canaan on dry ground (Joshua 3:17; see also Isaiah 11:16; 44:27, 28; Jeremiah 51:36; Zechariah 10:11).

But the sixth plague reminds us most strongly of the fall of Babylon to the Medes and Persians on the night of Belshazzar's feast (Daniel 5). You recall that Cyrus diverted the waters of the Euphrates River, drying them up where they flowed through the city of Babylon, so that his armies could march underneath the gates of the city and overthrow it. The Medes and

Persians came from the east to overthrow Babylon. John is drawing on this imagery in describing the sixth plague.

The second angel cries out, “Babylon is fallen, is fallen” (Revelation 14:8). Spiritual Babylon—the beast power—is being overthrown by God in the closing hours of earth. God is calling His people to come out of her so as not to be a part of her sins and her destruction. The waters of literal Babylon dried up when it was overthrown by Cyrus. According to Revelation 17:15 the waters of spiritual Babylon are the nations and peoples that support it. This support will dry up as Babylon falls and the seven last plagues ring down the curtain on sin and sinners.

The Battle of Armageddon

Under the sixth plague, John saw “three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet” (verse 13). These unclean spirits are the spirits of demons gathering the kings of the earth to the Battle of Armageddon.

There is a sort of play on words here in the Greek language in which John wrote. The Greek word for “spirit” is *pneuma*, which means “breath.” So to say that an evil “spirit” (*pneuma*) came out of the mouth of the dragon is the same as saying an evil “breath” (*pneuma*) came out of the mouth of the dragon. It’s a way of saying that the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet breathed out evil influences.

We have previously identified the dragon as Satan and the beast as the apostate Roman church. But who is the false prophet?

Revelation 19:20 says, “The beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image.” Speaking of the beast that arose from the earth, Revelation 13:13 says, “He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven in the sight of men. And he deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast.” Putting these two texts together, it seems clear that the false prophet is to be identified with the second beast of Revelation 13, which we have identified as the United States of America—the lamblike beast that speaks like a dragon.

The evil spirits, or influences, coming from the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet gather the kings of the earth to a great battle at a “place called in Hebrew, Armageddon” (verse 16).

This name has been associated with Megiddo, a city in Israel on the Plain of Esdraelon on the ancient highway from Egypt to Damascus. This plain was a great battleground of the ancient world. It was where Barak and Deborah defeated Sisera and his chariots (Judges 4). King Ahaziah died there in battle (2 Kings 9:27). Good king Josiah lost his life there in a battle with Pharaoh Necho (2 Kings 23:29, 30). It was a battleground famous in Hebrew history.

Many Bible students have understood Armageddon to refer to a great war of the nations at the end of time. The word itself has come to stand for a final showdown or a climactic struggle that ends in total destruction for all concerned—or in total defeat for one side and total victory for the other. There has been much speculation regarding who would be the antagonists in the Battle of Armageddon at the end of time. Various national match-ups have been suggested.

Revelation says that the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet gather the kings of earth to this battle. Given this imagery, it seems that Armageddon refers, not to a literal military battle between the nations of the earth, but to a spiritual struggle—the final battle in the spiritual struggle that has been the focus of the book of Revelation from the beginning. Armageddon is the final showdown in the great controversy between God and Satan. It is the final matchup between good and evil before Jesus comes.

Seventh Plague—Hail and Cosmic Destruction

Then the seventh angel poured out his bowl on into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, “It is done!” And there were noises and thundering and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake, such a mighty and great earthquake as had not occurred since men were on the earth. Now the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. And great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath. Then every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. And great hail from heaven fell upon men, each hailstone about

the weight of a talent. Men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, since that plague was exceedingly great (Revelation 16:17-21).

Each of the seven angels has poured out his plague on a different target—(1) the earth; (2) the sea; (3) rivers and springs; (4) the sun; (5) the throne of the beast; (6) the river Euphrates; and (7) the air. When the seventh angel pours out his plague into the air cosmic calamities of unimaginable destruction take place in the atmosphere as well as on the earth—hail, lightning, thunder, earthquake, mountains collapsing, islands disappearing. Hail was also one of the plagues poured out upon Egypt at the time of the Exodus (Exodus 9:24). A voice from heaven declares, “It is done!” This reminds us of Jesus’ cry on the cross as He died, “It is finished!” (John 19:30).

The battle of Armageddon—the final act in the great controversy—ends with the cataclysmic events that precede the appearance of Jesus on the clouds of heaven in power and great glory (Matthew 24:30).

Babylon thought that it could do as it pleased. It thought it could defy God successfully. Now it falls into pieces and is “remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath” (verse 19). Truly the wrath of God against sin is completed in the seven last plagues (Revelation 15:1).