

Revelation Fifteen

- Revelation 15 resumes the chronological movement of the book, and functions as a prelude to the *third* cycle of judgments – the seven vials (16.1-21). The former chapters (12.1-13.18) have given detailed reasons for such sweeping and comprehensive judgments. Now, in Revelation 15, heaven prepares to execute the wrath of God pronounced in 14.6-20. This is the calm before the storm.
- “With the seventh trumpet (11.15-19) the temple of God was opened in heaven and this temple becomes the background for the outpouring of the seven bowls which bring the tribulation to its close,” (Jim Allen). This has been a common pattern so far in the book, John being shown a glimpse of heaven before each cycle of judgment (cf. 4.1-5.14; 8.2-6; 11.19).

The Sign in Heaven [v.1]

v.1. This verse acts as a superscription for the next two chapters (15.1-16.21). John **saw another sign in heaven**, that is, an *additional* sign to the woman clothed with the sun (12.1) and the great red dragon (12.3). The word “sign” refers to a visual or physical symbol pointing to something beyond itself, especially something with a spiritual significance. On this occasion, the sign is **great** (remarkable, extraordinary in magnitude or effect) and **marvellous** (awe-inspiring) and consists of **seven angels having the seven last plagues** (the vials) which bring God’s wrath to an unparalleled and fearful conclusion. There have been previous groups of seven angels associated with the churches (1.20) and trumpets (8.2), but this is the first reference in Revelation to this particular group of seven (as indicated by the lack of a definite article).

The distinguishing feature of these angels is the fact they have the duty of inflicting the **seven last plagues**. The word “plague” refers to a powerful physical blow (or wound, cf. 13.3) and has reference the direct divine judgments of the vials poured out at the end of the tribulation. The word “plague” has already been used to describe the first six trumpets (9.20) and recalls the ten plagues of Egypt which God used to glorify His name by destroying Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. There is much in this part of Revelation that is reminiscent of Exodus. Thomas says, “Five of the plagues recall five of the ten Egyptian plagues in Exodus 7-10. The first and third bowl-plagues are particularly reminiscent of what God did to punish the Egyptians and to deliver His people Israel. Besides the plagues, other features of this context that resemble God’s previous deliverance are the crossing of the sea (16.12), the song of Moses (15.3), the giving of the Law amid the smoke of Sinai (15.8), and the erection of the tent of testimony (15.5). These similarities hint that the seven bowls have a similar purpose, that of punishing the world as a whole and delivering the faithful into their promised bliss.” These are the **last plagues** because **in them is filled up [teleō] the wrath of God**. The word *teleō* implies that once the bowls have been poured, God’s wrath (displeasure against sin) will have reached its ultimate goal and conclusion. There will be no more judgments poured out on the earth, only the final sessional judgments in which the beast, false prophet (19.20), dragon (20.10) and rebellious mankind (20.12-15) will be consigned to the lake of fire.

The Sea of Glass [v.2]

v.2. The scene of the next three verses presents martyrs of the tribulation rejoicing in their victory over the beast and the bliss of heaven’s rest. Their joy is in sharp contrast to the sorrow of those living under the seven last plagues. The **sea of glass** is situated before the throne of God (cf. 4.6). Being “like unto crystal” (4.6), it symbolises an inflexible state of purity that reflects the character of God and defines the actions of His throne. Its crystal quality likely reflects and radiates the glory of God through the throne room of heaven. In 4.6, the sea was vacant; now it is filled with a host of tribulation martyrs. It is amazing that these martyrs **stand on [epi] the sea**. They are standing on the solid pavement that comprises the final approach to the throne. Who dares stand in such a place? But the blood of the Lamb has fitted them for heaven and approach to God, far beyond the reach of condemnation and judgment. On this occasion, the sea is **mingled** (glowing) **with fire**, symbolic of the righteous judgments of God about to be poured out on the earth. The martyrs have the **harps of God**, which identifies them as the company whose voice John heard in 14.2. The only other company that has harps in Revelation is the 24 elders (5.8). The genitive (“of God”) can indicate *source*, i.e. God has given the saints the ability to praise Him, or *purpose* – the harps are used *for* the worship of God. Both are true.

The martyrs are described as **them that had gotten the victory [nikaō] over the beast**, by refusing to worship his **image** (religious pressure), and take the **mark or number of his name** (economic persecution). Though the company likely includes martyrs from the first half of the tribulation (cf. 6.9), the emphasis here falls on those who were martyred since the introduction of the image of the beast in the temple in Jerusalem. The present participle **gotten the victory** is timeless and describes the martyrs as permanent conquerors. Though, on earth, the beast was given power to “overcome” [*nikaō*] the saints (13.7), the ultimate and true victory belongs to those who “loved not their lives unto the death” (12.11). Death

gives way to life, seeming defeat to glorious victory. These saints stood apart from the satanic religious, commercial and political regime of the day and were assessed by heaven as victorious overcomers (cf. 1 John 2.13-14; 4.4; 5.4-5).

The Song of Moses & The Song of the Lamb [vv.3-4]

v.3. The harps are used by the saints in the singing of a song. Though the repetition of the phrase **the song** may indicate two *distinct* songs are in view, the singular citation in vv.3b-4 suggests otherwise. Probably the word **and** [*kai*] is epexegetical, and should therefore be translated, “the song of Moses, that is, the song of the Lamb” (G K Beale). The saints are recognising that the grand and glorious *redemption* (deliverance) experienced by Moses at the Red Sea has found its antitype in the Lamb who is the *Redeemer*. The genitives **of Moses** and **of the Lamb** *could* be syntactically opposite, meaning ‘the song sung *by* Moses’ (Exodus 15) and ‘the song *about* the Lamb’ (cf. Revelation 5.9-10). This is a song about the mighty deliverance (redemption) which God has accomplished through the blood of the Lamb (5.9).

The **song of Moses** could refer to either Exodus 15 or Deuteronomy 32. There are clear parallels with the experience of these martyrs in Deuteronomy (cf. 32.9, 41-43), but that song deals with God’s *punishment* of Israel for unfaithfulness. In contrast, Exodus 15 is a song of victory describing an astonishing *deliverance* from bondage in Egypt by the blood of the Passover lamb. The similarities are plain – these martyrs “have escaped the plague-stricken empire of the Beast; they have experienced the value of the blood of the Lamb and the moment has arrived for the overthrow of a far mightier tyrant than Pharaoh,” (Jim Allen). Moses is called the **servant** (slave) of God because he lived to do God’s will, not his own. The same was true of these martyrs (cf. 7.3) and now they sing the same kind of song Moses sang. The **song of the Lamb** celebrates the ultimate deliverance from the bondage of sin and Satan because of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

The first line of the song praises God’s *works*, the second acknowledges the justice of his *ways*. **Great and marvellous are thy works** uses the same language as v.1. God’s actions are extraordinary in magnitude and effect as well as awe-inspiring. The same wondrous deeds that plagued Egypt and cast horse and rider into the sea will vanquish the empire of the beast. This is the work of the **Lord God Almighty** (cf. 4.8). **Almighty** is *pantokrátōr* in Greek, deriving from *pás* [all, every] and *krátos* [power, strength, dominion]. Here is a God who has supreme power – He is the omnipotent sovereign Lord who controls events in heaven and on earth. As for God’s **ways**, they are **just** (righteous) **and true** (in accordance with truth, or upright), cf. Deuteronomy 32.4. Psalm 103.7 seems to make a difference between God’s works and His ways. God’s works are *what* He does; God’s ways are *why* He acts as He does. It is easy to see *what* God has done, but sometimes much more difficult to understand *why* He has done it. Thankfully, we can rest assured that everything God does is perfectly just and upright. These qualities are essential for a God who is **King over the nations** [NET], not “King of saints” [AV] which has very weak manuscript support. Despite the rebellion of the devil and mankind, God is recognised as the supreme Ruler who will yet establish His kingdom over all nations (cf. Jeremiah 10.7).

v.4. The mention of a God who is King over the nations introduces the thought of the impending kingdom (11.15). The verse begins with a two-part rhetorical question which implies the answer “no-one!” **Who shall not** (come to) **fear** (reverence) **thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name?** Jim Allen says, “The works and ways of the Almighty acting through history as the King of the nations demand fear and glory from men.” Eventually, once the last plagues (vials) are over, everyone will bow the knee to Christ and give Him place as Lord “to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2.9-11). The name of God is not a particular title or name that He bears, but the total revelation of who He is. The nations will fear and glorify God **for thou only art holy** [*hosios*], or literally, “because alone holy”. The word *hosios* is only found x7 in the NT. God is alone holy – describing not merely moral purity, but one who is uniquely unapproachable in His majesty, and therefore separate and distinct from all other beings. The word is used of Christ as the “Holy One” (Acts 2.27; 13.35). In addition, **all nations shall come and worship before thee** – a familiar theme of the Psalms and Prophets (Psalm 2.8-9; 72.11; Isaiah 2.2-4; 66.23; Daniel 7.14; Zechariah 14.9). This will be realised during the millennial kingdom in which all nations “shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts,” (Zechariah 14.16). It is the righteous judgments of the tribulation that have purged the earth and brought humanity to acknowledge the universal worship that is due to God alone – **for thy judgments are** (or ‘have been’ RV) **made manifest**.

The Sanctuary in Heaven [vv.5-8]

v.5. **After that I looked** introduces a startling, dramatic new vision. A glimpse of the awesome presence of God in His holy temple draws John’s attention away from the worship of redeemed saints back to the subject at hand – the seven last plagues. John saw **the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony** opened in heaven (cf. 11.19). The genitive “of the tabernacle” is probably appositional and should be rendered as “the temple, which is the tabernacle,” (G K Beale). The heavenly equivalent of the ‘holiest of all’ was opened – the innermost shrine of heaven and dwelling place of deity. The **tabernacle of the testimony** was so called because the ten commandments were housed within the Ark in the holiest. The commandments are the revelation of the righteous will of God which has been flagrantly disregarded. Now, without mercy, God’s righteous wrath against lawbreaking humanity is released. **v.6.** The temple **is opened** to allow the **seven**

angels (identified in v.1) to come out of the presence of God, primed with the **seven plagues** to pour upon the earth. They are **clothed in pure** (clean) **and white** (bright shining) **linen** to reflect the righteous judgments of the God in whose presence they have been standing. The bride of the Lamb will later be dressed in the same, reflecting her resplendent practical righteousness after the dross has been removed at the judgment seat of Christ (19.8). The angels have **breasts girded with golden girdles** or 'sashes' which identify them as emissaries of their priestly judge (cf. 1.13) on a judicial commission for the glory of God. John Riddle notes, "These angels are engaged in dispensing God's righteous indignation against sin. The breast is the place of love and affection – but such is the awful height of human sin, that divine affection is now completely restrained. His judgment is not tempered by mercy."

v.7. The **four beasts** (living creatures) are part of the innermost circle of the throne of God (4.6-7) and leaders of the heavenly court. They represent the highest order of celestial beings and seem to have a role in mediating divine judgment (cf. 6.1-8). The angels are given **seven golden vials** [*phiale*]. Vials were bowls or shallow dishes used to carry incense or drink offerings. A vessel of this shape could be completely emptied in one swift movement. They are golden because they will reveal the glory of God in their outpouring (cf. 14.7; 16.9). These vials are **full of the wrath** [*thumos*] **of God**, literally 'brimming over' with the hot and righteous indignation of God against sin. This wrath comes from the God **who liveth for ever and ever**, or "to the ages of the ages" [JND]. The eternal character of God is mentioned as an indication that these final judicial actions will usher in a period of *eternal* bliss for the saints (cf. 11.15) as well as *eternal* torment for the wicked (cf. 14.11; 19.3; 20.10). **v.8.** With the vials in the hands of the angels, the heavenly **temple** undergoes an awe-inspiring transformation into an environment accessible only to God (R L Thomas). The temple was **filled with smoke from the glory of God, and from his power**. Smoke (probably the Shechinah glory) is an emblem of majesty and a fitting symbol of God's presence (cf. Genesis 15.17; Exodus 19.18, 40.34; Isaiah 6.4). Like Aaron's handfuls of incense on the day of atonement, the smoke seems to conceal God lest His glory and power consume the one who approaches. Jim Allen says. "Men cannot gaze directly upon the glory of God nor scrutinise His power so the smoke while it manifests also conceals lest men be destroyed." The smoke has the effect of rendering God's presence unapproachable – **no man was able to enter**. Heaven is closed for business. This indicates, symbolically, that God will not permit any intercession during the period of the bowl judgments – **till the seven plagues were fulfilled** (completed). Jeremiah expressed a similar thought in Lamentations, "Thou hast covered thyself with a cloud, that *our* prayer should not pass through," (3.44). Tatford summarises, "God was hidden in the thick cloud of His glory and power; grace was withdrawn and prayer unanswered. The Almighty would listen to no cry and would allow no plea to arrest the breaking of the storm of judgment. His power and glory were now moved to action, and the glorious Shekinah became a devouring fire."