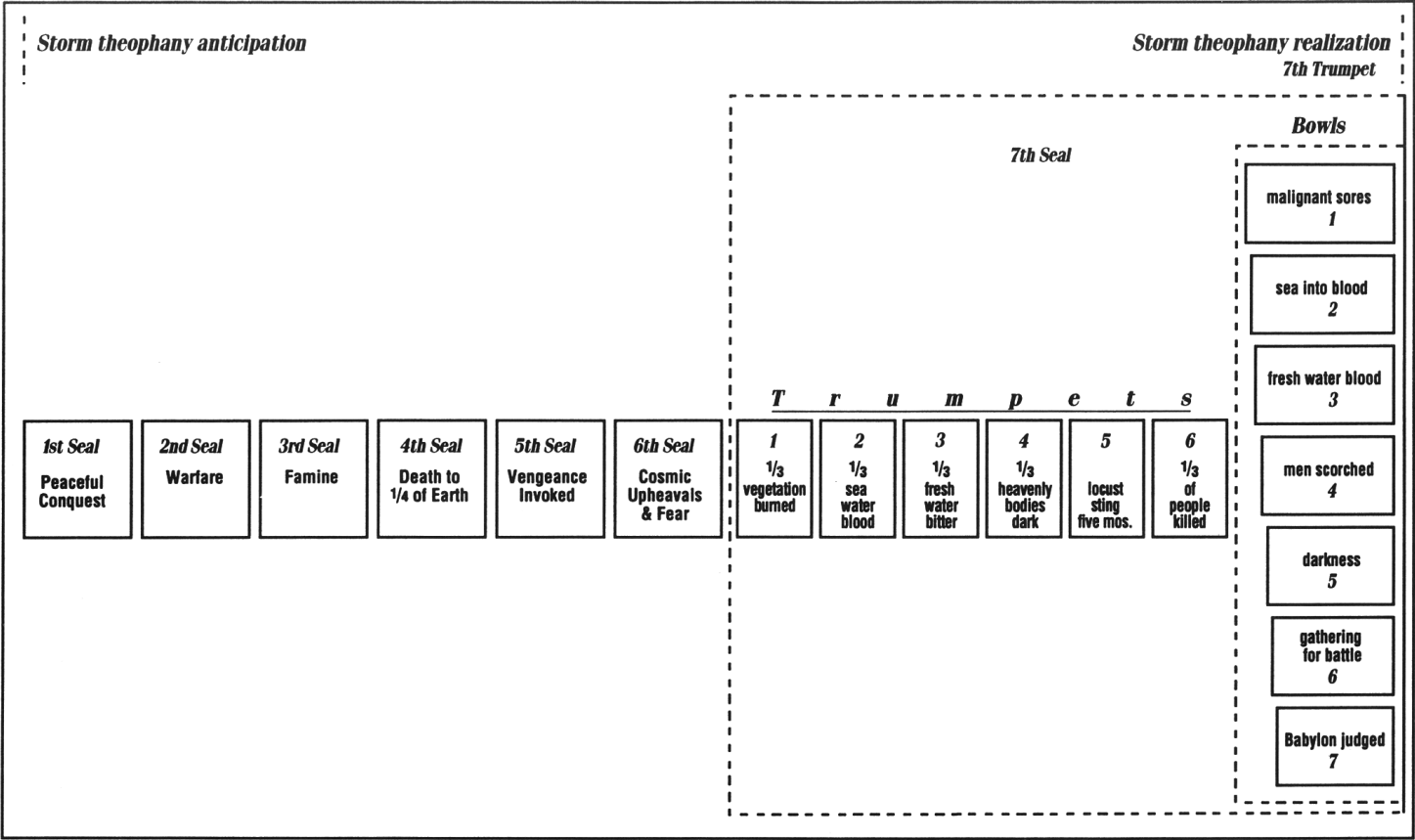


Revelation Sixteen

This chapter describes the *third* cycle of judgments in Revelation – the **seven vials (bowls)**.

- The vials reveal the “wrath of God” (15.7; 16.1) and are poured out (quickly) because the world has blasphemed Him (16.9, 11). Administered by angels, God is declaring war on the kingdom of the Beast (16.10).
- The cycles of judgment are *successive* (or telescopic) since the seventh seal opens the seven trumpets, and the seventh trumpet opens the temple of God in heaven (11.15-19) from which the seven angels with the bowls proceed (15.6).
- The judgments are *progressive* in their intensity and severity. The seals destroyed a *quarter* of the earth, the trumpets a *third* of the earth, and now the bowls affect the *whole* earth.
- Both the trumpets and the bowls clearly echo the plagues of Egypt. God’s deliverance and redemption of His people is something He has done before, on a smaller scale, and will now accomplish again. The plagues of Egypt were in *three groups of three* (nine in total), followed by a *divine visitation* (the Passover). So, the judgments of the tribulation will be in *three groups of seven* (21 in total) followed by a *divine visitation* – the return of Christ Himself.
- The seals, trumpets and vials all clearly divide into *four* and *three*. With the vials, the *first four* use natural means (the bowls are poured on the earth, sea, rivers and sun) to affect *individuals* that belong to the beast. The *last three* are direct judgments on the throne (kingdom) of the beast and are *international* in scale.



R L Thomas: “The Sequence of the Seals, Trumpets and Bowls”

Vial One: Grievous Sores [vv.1-2]

v.1. John **heard a great [megas] voice out of the temple** – the location of the immediate presence of God, which has become inaccessible due to the thick (Shekinah) cloud of God’s glory and power (cf. 15.8). The “great voice” speaks again in v.17, coming this time not out of the temple, but from the throne itself. This must be the voice of God. The word *megas* is used x11 in this chapter, describing great heat (v.9), the great river Euphrates (v.12), a great earthquake (v.18) and the great city (v.19) to list but a few. All is moving towards the consummation of “the battle of that great day of God Almighty” (v.14). The emphasis on the *temple of heaven* is because, at this time, there is a *temple on earth* in Jerusalem that has been filled with the abomination of desolation. John Riddle says, “*The temple on earth will see consummate evil: the temple in heaven is marked by intense holiness. The claims of divine holiness, represented in the temple in heaven, are now to be asserted over an evil world, whose wickedness under Satan, has now reached its height.*” The angels are commanded to **go** and **pour out the vials** [*phialē*] of the wrath of God upon the earth. The *aorist imperative* expresses urgency to which the angels respond by emptying their bowls in rapid and cumulative succession. As noted previously

(15.7), the vials are bowls (shallow dishes) used to carry drink offerings – but, in this case, contain the wine of the **wrath of God** (cf. 14.10). A vessel of this shape could be completely emptied in one swift movement suggesting the sudden onslaught of judgment. The bowls are **poured upon** planet **earth** in a general sense – including its land, seas and rivers.

v.2. In obedience to the divine command, the **first angel went** and **poured out his vial** upon the **earth**. The word “earth” [gē] is more restricted than v.1, referring here to the *land* in distinction to the sea and rivers. The bowl produces a **noisome and grievous sore** or “ugly and painful ulcerated sores” [NET]. The language is expressive, describing festering and malignant sores which remain inflamed and do not heal. The same was experienced by the Egyptians (Exodus 9.9-11), Job (Job 2.7) and Lazarus (Luke 16.21). Those affected would be unable to walk, sit, or lie down without intense pain. Now that God has declared war on the kingdom of the beast, the sores *only* afflict those who **had the mark of the beast and worshipped his image** – these are two identification marks of the same people. They were willing to receive the brand of the beast on their skin, and now suffer grievous marks of divine judgment on the same.

Vial Two: Sea of Blood [v.3]

v.3. The **second angel poured** his vial **upon** or “into” [RV] **the sea**. For John, the sea was the Mediterranean Sea, but the language used here is universal, not local – this involves every sea as one connected whole. The sea became **as the blood of a dead man** or ‘blood, like that of a dead person (corpse)’. The sea becomes as coagulated blood, thick and congealed – no doubt accompanied by a pungent, foul odour. Consequently, **every living soul** (creature) in the sea **died**. This is a fearful development from the second trumpet when “a third of the creatures living in the sea died,” (8.8-9). Now, nothing can survive in this toxic mass (cp. Genesis 1.21). Both the second and third vials are reminiscent of the first Egyptian plague which turned the Nile into blood (Exodus 7.19-21).

Vial Three: Rivers of Blood [vv.4-7]

v.4. The **third angel poured** his vial **upon** the surface **rivers and fountains** (underground springs) **of waters**. Apparently, water in wells and cisterns will be untouched. By this time, fresh water will be in critically short supply, a third of the world’s fresh water having already been polluted under the third trumpet (8.10-11, cf. 11.6). These waters, just like the sea, **became blood** (cf. Psalm 78.44). God is eradicating, in judgment, what is vital for life. Jim Allen notes, “*Perhaps this is the very time when the cup of cold water becomes very precious indeed,*” (Matthew 10.42). Ultimately, those who enter the millennial kingdom will enjoy the “springs of living water” to be found in Christ (Revelation 7.17).

v.5. In somewhat parenthetical remarks, John hears the **angel of the waters** speak. Revelation gives us some remarkable insights into the ‘normally hidden administration of the cosmos’ (Jim Allen) in that we are introduced to angels who govern the winds (7.1) and have authority over fire (14.18). This angel appears to be the superintendent of God’s water department, responsible for the rivers and underground springs, and possibly the seas too. The angel declares the justice of the third bowl judgment saying, **Thou art righteous, O Lord**. MacArthur says, “That God’s judgments are true and righteous is the constant teaching of Scripture. They are not like the capricious judgments associated with false pagan gods,” (cf. Genesis 18.25; Psalm 19.9). The angel continues with a description of the character of God which determines that His judgments cannot be anything less than righteous, for God is “**the one who is and who was, the Holy One**” [NET]. God is eternal as to his existence, but in full control of time, both past and present. In addition, God is altogether holy (cf. 15.4), that is, uniquely unapproachable in His majesty, and therefore separate and distinct from all other beings – His dealings with men cannot be questioned. This holiness is now being manifested in judgment on the earth. **v.6.** In fact, the judgment God has passed is altogether fitting and measured. Hence the angel says, “**they are worthy**”. Those loyal to the beast are getting what they deserve – their punishment fits the crime. This is a reference to the divine principle of sowing and reaping (Galatians 6.7-8) – Jacob sowed deception, and ultimately wrought deception at the hands of Laban. These persecutors **have shed the blood of saints and prophets**, therefore God has **given them blood to drink**. The scales of divine justice are evenly balanced. Many of God’s people will be mercilessly persecuted the martyred in the tribulation, indeed Babylon is held responsible for “the blood of prophets, and of saints, And of all that were slain upon the earth,” (18.24, cf. 17.6). Jim Allen says, “*When men give worship to the beast, they share his guilt for the war of extermination waged against the saints and prophets in the last half of the tribulation.*” God therefore deprives these individuals of drinking water, and, instead, gives them to drink the very element they have been guilty of shedding.

v.7. John hears **another** voice, this time coming **out of the altar**. It could be that the incense altar (in heaven) is being personified, or perhaps this is the voice of the angel of the altar (cf. 8.3-5; 9.13-14). The altar speaks because it is associated with the prayers of the saints for vengeance – which are now being answered. The voice from the altar agrees with the angel of the waters saying, “Yes, Lord God, the All-Powerful, your judgments are true and just!” [NET]. God is fittingly addressed as **Lord God Almighty**, the all-powerful Sovereign who alone has the might and authority to effect justice on earth (Fanning). Indeed, God’s **judgments** (the sentences He passes), are always **true** (in accordance with fact) and **righteous** (just). All of God’s actions are grounded in His perfect nature.

Vial Four: Scorching of the Sun [vv.8-9]

v.8. The **fourth angel poured** out his **vial** upon [*epi*] the **sun**. In earlier judgments the sun and other heavenly bodies were partially darkened (6.12; 8.12), but here the sun flares with intense heat. The phrase **power was given unto him** (i.e. the sun) shows that God gives divine permission to the sun to **scorch men with fire**. This is the literal fulfilment of Isaiah 24.6, "Therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men left." The word "scorch" [*kaumatizō*] means to become dried out by heat and presents the graphic picture of wheat in rocky soil withering under a blazing sun (Matthew 13.6). The *article* suggests 'the men' in view are the same men mentioned in v.2, the men which had the mark of the beast. **v.9.** These men were **scorched with great heat**, or 'burned severely'. The judgment stands in stark contrast to those saints in the Kingdom, "they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat," (7.16). Men are in no doubt that God exists and is the root cause of these plagues (cf. 6.16), yet the desperately wicked and rebellious human heart would prefer to **blaspheme** than repent. So far in Revelation, only the first beast has been recorded as blaspheming (13.6). He thinks nothing of speaking contemptuously against God and demeaning His **name** (character and reputation). Now the people of the beast have taken on the character of the god whom they serve. They **repented not to give him glory** means they would not change their minds and acknowledge God as the only, true and living God (Acts 14.15). Like Pharaoh of old (Exodus 8.32), their hearts are hardened, and destruction is inevitable.

Vial Five: Darkness in the Kingdom [vv.10-11]

v.10. The **fifth angel poured** out his **vial** upon [*epi*] the **seat** [*thronos*] **of the beast**. This could have reference to the administrative capital city of the beast, and therefore the geographical location of his throne. Alternatively, and more likely, the word 'seat' stands as a symbol of the centre of his rule, authority and power. Thus, a judgment on his throne is a judgment on his entire kingdom. So, **his kingdom was full of darkness**, or 'plunged into darkness' (cf. Joel 2.2; 3.14-15; Zephaniah 1.15) – symbolic of the moral condition of the kingdom. The darkness will probably cover the geographical territory of the kingdom of the beast, just as darkness covered Egypt in the ninth plague. *Exodus 10.21: "The Lord said to Moses, Extend your hand toward heaven so that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness so thick it can be felt,"* [NET]. In Egypt, God's people had light in their dwellings, and perhaps the same will be true in this day of the remnant. The darkness will be so intense and heavy that those who belong to the kingdom of the beast will **gnaw their tongues for pain** [*ponos*]. The singular 'pain' suggests it is the darkness that has caused a most agonising and excruciating pain. Presumably the extended darkness will cause such severe distress people will be tormented. To bite one's tongue is a natural reaction to extreme pain and recalls the metaphor of the Lord Jesus when describing eternal judgment, "*there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth*" (Matthew 24.51; 25.30). **v.11.** The *singular* 'pain' in v.10 is now used in the *plural*, **pains** – this seems to sum up the cumulative effect of the first five vials, exemplified in the **sores**, not to mention the polluted oceans, lack of drinking water and intense heat. But, again, men refused to **repent of their deeds**, choosing instead to **blaspheme the God of heaven**. They have been reconfirmed in their hardness of heart and unbelief.