

The Revelation to John
Chapter Fifteen
The Third Sign

A Prelude to the Final Judgment

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A Scene of Heaven and a Prelude to the Final Judgment

This is the shortest chapter in the book. John tells us of his vision showing that the final judgments of God will be poured forth on earth. The preceding chapter has already depicted the end of judgments so John is now showing some further details of the wrath of God upon the earth. The typical Hebrew writing style is to repeat each cycle in new ways and to add fresh details not in the former series. If one attempts to understand Revelation using a strict linear time line, severe difficulties ensue. Either John interjects explanatory discussions in his writing based upon the complete vision he received or God gives John the visions in a nonlinear fashion. I prefer to regard God as in control of the vision and He has just given John – in what we call chapter 14 – a vision of the end so that he and the churches will be encouraged knowing that God is in control and that He will be victorious. There are other examples of God giving us information in a nonlinear fashion such as the information in Genesis chapter two being an expansion of some details of its chapter one.

After giving us all the knowledge of a final conquest by God, the vision now gives us a prelude to the final pouring of God's wrath on mankind at the end. Although this will occur at the end of time, all on earth should be aware of what will happen on unrepentant man. Justice by the only true judge will be exacted in accordance to all actions and thoughts of man. Chapters 15 and 16 deal with the seven last plagues of God's wrath. We will see that chapter 15 is oriented strongly toward the OT account of the Exodus event and the chapter has roughly two visions. One portrays the victors who emerged triumphant from the great ordeal (vv. 2-4) and the second portrays the appearance from the heavenly temple of seven angels clothed in white and gold and holding the seven bowls of the last plagues.

Before he proceeds, he gives us the third sign and a marvelous vision of a scene in heaven.

Rev 15:1 “And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels who had seven plagues, which are the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished.”

John elaborates on this sign to describe its significance because it heralds the last of God's wrath on sinful mankind. An endpoint is coming to complete this era of God's creation. This is the third sign John has seen in the vision (Rev 12: 1, 3) and it is the greatest because it points to the final judgments of God. The sign consists of the seven angels who serve God's bondservants and dispense His judgments. The word “plague” does not necessarily mean a disease but can mean deadly blows that will strike the world. We have seen many acts of God's wrath throughout this tribulation and now we are going

to witness the final scenes. As you know, I take this tribulation period as extending throughout the time since the beginning of the church. Knowing that there will be a time when tribulation ceases and that God is sovereign over all these events is very comforting. This understanding would have been especially helpful to the seven churches to whom the letter was first sent.

Rev 15:2 “And I saw, as it were, a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had come off victorious from the beast and from his image and from the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God.”

What a remarkable vision! None of God’s bondservants were lost to the cast of evil that had been thrown against them. The description of a sea of glass mixed with fire is unusual. Some see this as a reference to the Red Sea and God’s victory sending His people through it. Fire is symbolic of judgment and wrath so this setting could symbolize God’s people coming through the fiery judgment of God:

- *Heb 10:26-27 “For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.”*
- *2Peter 3:7 “But the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.”*

Other Scripture verses illustrate such a surface in heaven as depicted in: *“and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself.”* (Exodus 24:10)

Being able to stand on the sea mixed with fire could symbolize that God’s people have passed through the judgment and are standing in heaven with God.

Saying that the harps were “of God” could also be interpreted “given by God” but either way the harps belong to God and He has allowed His people to use them to praise Him for His actions on their behalf. Humans usually think of victory in terms of being able to come through battles saving their lives. But since our home is not earth we can even think of victory in a different sense. The highest goal for us is to not deny the lordship of Jesus Christ even if in so doing we lose our life. The martyrs of God lost their temporary life on earth but gained an eternal victory over death. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews gives us examples of many of God’s people who seemed to have been defeated from an earthly perspective but who gained life eternal with God in heaven. Perspective is critical for a proper understanding of life. This is a great picture of God’s people having been victorious from the beast, his image, and his number. These martyrs are those whom God has preserved and who will live forever praising Him. Other verses also refer to them:

- *Rev 2:7 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.'*

- Rev 2:11 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.'
- Rev 2:26 'He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS;
- Rev 3:21 'He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.
- Rev 12:11 "And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death.
- Rev 21:7 "He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.

We have already discussed them as being represented by the 144,000:

- Rev 7:4 And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:
- Rev 14:1 Then I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads.

Rev 15:3 “And they sang the song of Moses the bond-servant of God and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and marvelous are Thy works, O Lord God, the Almighty; Righteous and true are Thy ways, Thou King of the nations.

Rev 15:4 "Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Thy name? For Thou alone art holy; For all the nations will come and worship before Thee, For Thy righteous acts have been revealed."”

Since there is a repeat of the words “the song of”, some exegetes consider that there are two songs involved. They say that there is a song of Moses and a song of Jesus. However it is more likely, especially since he tells us the song, that only one song is sung and it is a song praising God for His works in saving His people throughout the ages. It does seem that the song contains some of the elements of the song of Moses in Exodus chapter 15 and the song of the Lamb in the fifth chapter of Revelation. The Exodus background is evident throughout the 15th and 16th chapters of Revelation. The people were amazed at the works of the beast but the works of God are infinitely greater and more marvelous than any exhibited by any of His creations. God is Lord and the Almighty as He alone is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. He alone is righteous and true for truth can only come for what is real and He is the ultimate reality. Since He alone is righteous by His standards then He is the only possible Judge. The Jews wanted an earthly king but God is the true King of all nations. He is the definition of holiness and nobody is capable of achieving such a measure alone so all should fear Him and glorify Him. In this time period a name personifies people so glorifying His name is the same as glorifying Him. There will be a time as anticipated in the book of Psalms when all will worship Him: *“’All the earth will worship Thee, And will sing praises to Thee; They will sing praises to Thy name.’ Selah.”* (Psa 66:4)

Now that His righteous acts have been revealed for all to see, there remains no excuse for people to not know of His existence. But only those who have been given faith to believe

before such a revelation will be praising Him in heaven. Paul clearly stated that only those whom God has blessed can understand His ways: “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.” (1 Cor 2:14). All others will receive judgment due to their acts. We receive grace! Hallelujah!

Rev 15:5 “After these things I looked, and the temple of the tabernacle of testimony in heaven was opened,

Rev 15:6 and the seven angels who had the seven plagues came out of the temple, clothed in linen, clean and bright, and girded around their breasts with golden girdles.”

The tabernacle of testimony is the Greek translation of the tent of meeting that was used in the wilderness. It symbolizes the very presence of God that is opened so that we know that what follows is decreed by God. This is the second time the door to heaven has been opened: “*And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened; and the ark of His covenant appeared in His temple, and there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder and an earthquake and a great hailstorm.*” (Rev 11:19). The angels come from the presence of God and they are pure and girded for action with rich, priestly girdles. They are not the ghoulish fiends we have seen previously, but are pure messengers from God bringing His final outpouring of wrath. All other beings were certainly under the authority of God but these have a very different appearance and some might even be viewed with relief until they begin to pour forth God’s wrath.

Rev 15:7 “And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God, who lives forever and ever.

Rev 15:8 And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power; and no one was able to enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.”

The four living creatures come from close to the throne of God so what follows is seen as directly from God. In case anyone had any doubt, God is identified as the eternal One. The word translated bowls (phiale) is the same word used for the vessels that contained the prayers of the saints in Rev 5:8 so it may be that God is telling us that the prayers of the saints are involved in the outpouring of God’s wrath upon mankind. Certainly the prayers of God’s people accomplish much as stated by James: “*The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.*” (James 5:16b) These bowls could also be the ones used to collect the blood of the sacrifices (Exod 27:3) and so could be used to pour forth the wrath of God that would also be cleansing for those people who were cleansed by the sacrifice of Jesus.

The same scene was presented in a time of Moses serving God and by Isaiah:

- *Exodus 40:34-35 “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. ³⁵And Moses was not able to enter the tent of*

meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.”

- *Isa 6:4 “And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.”*

The temple was temporarily closed until the time of the last outpouring of God’s wrath was complete. Even angels could not enter it until the culmination of this event. The point being that nobody could be saved from this wrath. The time of repenting was over. There is a cup of salvation as depicted in: *“I shall lift up the cup of salvation, And call upon the name of the Lord.”* (Psa 116:13)

For those who refuse to drink of the cup of salvation they will be forced to endure the bowls of wrath from God. Truly this will be a time of great woe!