

THE LAMB IS THE LORD

A journey through the Book of Revelation

4 ► Crashing Waves of Judgment



[The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum](#), a painting by John Martin, painted in 1822 and restored 2011. Photo: Tate.

The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum, painted by John Martin, showing the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. Revelation was very probably written during the emperor Domitian's reign in 81-96 AD. If so, the eruption of Vesuvius would have been a recent memory. In Revelation 8:8 we read, "The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea" (see page 7). When reading about this judgment, some may have cast their minds back to this catastrophic event.

Introduction

We now arrive at perhaps the most challenging—and at times, disturbing—section of Revelation. All we've learned so far has prepared us for what we now read.

We marvelled at the magnificent vision of our Messiah Jesus in all His power and glory. We were taken to the courts of heaven, the very throne-room of Almighty God, to behold "one seated on the throne" (4:2). We saw Messiah Jesus, the conquering Lion and the slain and resurrected Lamb, who is worthy to open the scroll—the scroll inscribed with God's plan to rescue

and restore us and our world. God and the Lamb are on the throne at the centre of the Universe. And ceaselessly, day and night, a glorious symphony of praise rises in worship.

All that we encounter from now on *must be seen in the light of these visions*. We know that God has absolute sovereignty over Earth. We know that, through His death and resurrection, Jesus will complete God's plan to rescue and restore His people and His creation. Let these truths protect our minds and encourage our

hearts as we embark on our journey through the chapters that follow. In this session, we'll be looking at Revelation 6:1-11:19, and 15:5-16:21. Revelation 12:1-14:20 together with 15:2-4 is a separate section—'a story within the story'. We'll look at that section in the following session.

Three sets of judgments sweep across the Earth. These are heralded in turn by *the opening of the scroll's seven seals*, by *the blowing of seven trumpets*, and by *the emptying of seven bowls*. Among these judgments, we see visions of God's people. Here's an outline:

- ▶ Seven judgments are heralded by *the opening of the seals* (6:1-17, 8:1,3-5).
 - God's people are "144,000" who are sealed (7:1-8); they're secure because they belong to God; He's enlisted them in His army.
 - God's people are a great multitude who've passed triumphantly through tribulation. They're sheltered in God's presence and serve Him there; the Lamb is their Shepherd (7:9-17).
- ▶ Seven judgments are heralded by *the blowing of seven trumpets* (8:2,8:6-9:21).
 - John is told to take and eat a "little scroll" and commanded to prophesy (10:1-11).
 - God's people are God's "temple", protected by God but suffering tribulation. They are "witnesses" who give faithful and powerful testimony to Jesus—a testimony for which they suffer death. But God resurrects them. And, in the wake of an earthquake, it seems their testimony bears fruit—many people are "terrified" and give "glory to the God of heaven" (Revelation 11:13).
- ▶ Seven judgments are inaugurated by *the emptying of seven bowls* (15:1, 15:5-16:21).

When do these judgments occur? There are a number of views:

- The *preterist* view. This term comes from the Latin term *praeter*, one of whose meanings is 'past'. This view sees the judgments as taking place *in the first century AD*.
- The *futurist* view sees these judgments as *all in the future, during a brief time before Jesus's Second Coming*. This view is especially prevalent in the United States. It has, for example, been promoted by the *Left Behind* series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.
- The *historicist* view sees the judgments as taking place *in the order described, one after the other, through history from the first century AD to Christ's return*. This is not now a widely-held view.
- The *idealist* view sees these three sets of judgments *as all taking place during the whole period between*

Pentecost and our Lord's return.

(There are also different views of "the thousand years" of Revelation 20:1-10. We'll look at these in session 6.)

The approach we'll be taking is based on the idealist view. These three sets of judgments all occur *during the whole period between the Day of Pentecost and our Lord's Second Coming*—a period that's so far lasted around 2,000 years. The Bible calls this whole period the "last days" (Acts 2:17, quoting Joel 2:28). All three sets end with Christ's return. This is supported by the fact that they all end in a storm, a sign of God's all-powerful presence here on Earth (Revelation 8:5, 11:19 and 16:18).

So, broadly speaking, these three sets of judgments occur in *parallel*, rather than one set after another. It seems that we're seeing God's judgments three times, *but each time we're viewing them from a different camera angle, a different viewpoint*. But it's also clear that, overall, *the judgments get more severe*:

- ▶ The three sets of judgments are of intensifying severity. The fourth seal judgment affects a quarter of the earth (6:8). The first four and the sixth trumpet judgments affect a third of the earth (8:7-12; 9:15-19). But we don't read of any limits to the bowl judgments.
- ▶ And the fifth and sixth trumpet judgments are more severe than the first four; the fifth bowl judgment is more severe than the first four.

These various judgments may occur multiple times during these "last days". They may afflict different individuals, divisions of society, nations and empires. So at any one time in history, for example, one division of society may be suffering more limited judgment (portrayed by the seal judgments), whilst a nation in another part of the world may be suffering devastating judgment (portrayed by the bowl judgments).^{[1][2]} But as the Lord's return draws near, they'll doubtless become more universal, impacting the whole world.

Why does God intensify His judgments? He's increasing the pressure on a world that's turned its back on Him. He's doing this to bring the nations to their knees—so *they submit to Him and worship Him as their Creator and Lord*. He's sending these plagues to *save people*, to save them from "the punishment of eternal destruction" (2 Thessalonians 1:9). And along with God's judgments (as we'll see in 11:3-13), His people are bearing witness to Him and to Jesus Christ—to the One who sits on the Throne of the Universe, and to the Lamb (compare Revelation 5:13). They're proclaiming the gospel. As Peter writes: "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 3:9).

Revelation doesn't give us a precise timetable. But we *do* know that the course of history is moving with ever greater intensity and momentum to the time when "all

the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matthew 24:30).

The Judgments of the Seven Seals (6:1-8:1, 8:3-5)

Six seals opened (6:1-17)

The four horsemen of the Apocalypse (6:1-8)



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An artist's depiction of the four horsemen who bring the judgments unleashed by the opening of the first four seals of the scroll (Revelation 5:1-8)—the 'four horsemen of the apocalypse'.

The Lamb begins to unseal the scroll. As each seal is broken, one of the four living creatures cries "Come!" (6:1,3,5,7). A horseman responds to each cry:

- The first horseman rides *a white horse*. Towards the end of Revelation, we see Christ riding "a white horse" (19:11). But this rider seems certain to be a *counterfeit* of Christ, symbolising lust for power and conquest—a false christ out to conquer people's hearts and minds. Time and again, through history, people with a thirst for dominance have risen to power. Such thirst may be fuelled by false ideology, but it's always energised by demonic spirits. In modern times, we can think of Hitler and his Nazi ideology, Mao Tse-Tung and Stalin and their communist ideologies. But many ideologies, movements, and leaders throughout history can be included in the symbolism of this rider.
- The second horseman rides *a red horse*. He is a symbol of war and bloodshed—between nations, and also civil strife and war within nations.
- The third horseman rides *a black horse*. Its rider has "a pair of scales in his hand" (6:5). John hears a voice saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!" (Revelation 6:6). The prices quoted here are prices inflated because of famine; this horseman symbolises famine and poverty. But the famine is not complete; the oil and wine is spared.
- The fourth horseman rides *a pale horse* (6:8). This

word "pale" is either a yellowish or greyish green; this horse symbolises sickness and death. This horseman's name is "Death, and Hades followed him". 'Hades' is the realm of the dead. And "they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth" (6:8).

There's a logical connection between these four 'horsemen' judgments. Lust for conquest and power leads to conflict and bloodshed; strife and disorder lead to shortages and famine; the breakdown of society leads to infection and disease and the resurgence of wild beasts. The end result of all this is death, so often on a monumental scale. Time and time again, this sequence of conquest, war, famine and death has played out across the bloodstained canvas of human history. It will continue until our Lord returns.

Where is God in all this chaos and suffering and death?

- Remember what we saw in the previous sessions. *God is seated on the throne of the Universe*. Behind all the events of history is the hand of God. A crown is "given" to the first horseman; the second horseman is "permitted" to bring conflict and bloodshed on Earth and is "given" a sword; the fourth horseman Death, with Hades following him, are "given" authority over a quarter of the Earth. Who is doing the giving and permitting? It is God. One writer comments, "Where is God? He is on his throne. Why doesn't he do something? He is doing something. Death by the sword, famine, plague, wild animals are indications not of God's absence but of his presence: this is what happens when God turns his face upon a world that has turned its back upon him."^[3]
- Secondly, God allows mankind to go their own way. Go back to Adam and Eve's first sin (Genesis 3:1-6). In one writer's words, "Through Satan's lying subtlety, mankind embarked upon the mad experiment of disobedience and human self-sufficiency, . . ." ^[4] Here in Revelation we see God allowing this "mad experiment" to take its course. In Romans 1:24,26,28 we read that God "gave . . . up" sinners to pursue their sin. Here in Revelation, God does the same. He isn't simply allowing sin to take its course. He's actively handing over mankind to this downward spiral of chaos and destruction. And when mankind have their own way, they will destroy themselves. Always.

► But God allows that inevitable downward spiral to go only so far. In ancient times, God twice stepped in to halt mankind's plunge to self-destruction—by a great flood in the days of Noah, then by confusing the language of Babel's builders, and scattering them. God restrains evil. He does this so that many, many people have opportunity to repent and be saved. As Peter writes, the Lord does not wish **“that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance”** (2 Peter 3:9).

God's faithful people under the altar (6:9-11)

When the Lamb opens the fifth seal, John sees **“under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne”** (6:9). Those **“who had been slain”** refers to all those who suffer for Christ's sake—and that includes *all* His faithful followers (see, for example, Philippians 1:29). In the war, chaos, hardship, disease and death unleashed by the four horsemen, Christians suffer alongside unbelievers. But when godless regimes hold power, it's so often Christians who suffer most.

These believers are **“under the altar”**. In the Tabernacle and Temple there were two altars: the altar of burnt offering (Exodus 27:1-8, 2 Chronicles 4:1) and the altar on which incense was offered (Exodus 30:1-10, 1 Kings 6:20,22). This vision seems to point to both. These believers have presented themselves to God **“as a living sacrifice”** (Romans 12:1). All have lived sacrificial lives; some have been killed—thus pointing to the altar of burnt offering. And they are praying. Prayer is associated with incense (as we saw in the previous session), thus pointing to the altar of incense. They're praying, **“O Sovereign Lord . . . how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”** (6:10). Those **“who dwell on the earth”** refers not merely to those who live here on Earth, but to those who value only earthly things, and find their security in this world, not in God. They are, in fact, followers of Satan.

These believers aren't seeking personal revenge; they're calling for God to bring justice. Jesus Himself said, **“will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?”** (Luke 18:7).

They're given white robes; the colour white here signifies purity, victory and honour. These believers are pure. So they have victory over all their enemies. God has called us, after we **“have suffered a little while”** to **“his eternal glory in Christ”** (1 Peter 5:10). But these believers under the altar must wait **“a little longer”** until *all* God's faithful people are gathered into His Kingdom (6:11).

The great day of God's wrath (6:12-17)

The Lamb opens the sixth seal. A **“great earthquake”** accompanies a cosmic convulsion (6:12-14)—echoing such passages as Joel 2:10,30-31, Isaiah 34:4, and Matthew 24:29. These events tell us that the Day of Judgment is near—the day when the prayers of God's faithful people under the altar are fully answered (6:10).

What we read here is symbolic language. What will people actually experience when this cosmic upheaval happens? We don't really know. What we do know is that the unbelievers alive on Earth at that time—**“the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free”** (6:15)—will be driven to recognise that God is about to judge the world. They'll desperately try to hide **“from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb”** (6:15-16).

One day, God will turn His face upon every one of us. The **“face”** of God refers to His attitude toward us, His relationship with us. For believers, to see God's face is their eternal reward (see 22:4); it will be a joy outshining every other joy. But for those who reject God, to see His face will be terrifying beyond words. They will seek refuge, just as Adam and Eve **“hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden”** (Genesis 3:8).

The **“great day of”** the **“wrath”** of **“him who is seated on the throne”** and **“the Lamb”** is at hand. Many people recoil from the idea of God's wrath. But His wrath isn't vindictive or capricious fury. In John Stott's words, it's His **“steady, unrelenting, unremitting, uncompromising antagonism to evil . . .”** ^[5] Sin is loathsome. God would violate His own holy nature if He were to overlook evil and do nothing about it. *But we must also remember that God Himself, in His immeasurable love, has provided a way for people to escape His wrath.*

In their terror, those fleeing God ask: **“who can stand?”** Can anyone stand before God? We shall see.

God's sealed people before the throne (7:1-17)

The 144,000 sealed servants of God (7:1-8)

The turmoil pauses. John sees **“four angels . . . holding back the four winds of the earth, . . .”** (7:1). These **“four winds”** picture God's wrath and judgment (for example, Jeremiah 49:36, Zechariah 2:6).

John sees another angel **“with the seal of the living God”**. This angel forbids the four angels from harming earth or sea or trees **“until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads”** (7:2-3). In ancient times,



The Great Day of His Wrath, painted by John Martin in 1851-1853. © Photo: Tate.

The Great Day of His Wrath, painted by John Martin. "When he opened the sixth seal, . . . there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth . . . The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place." (Revelation 6:12-14)

seals were used to identify something's owner, and to protect it from being tampered with. God seals His people to identify them as His. He seals them to protect them from losing their eternal life. And He seals them to protect them from those judgments that fall on the ungodly (which we read about later).

Later, we'll see people who are to be marked with the mark of the beast (13:16-18, 14:9-11, 16:2, 19:20)—they're citizens of Satan's kingdom, and worship Satan's beast. Everyone is either sealed with "the seal of the living God", or marked with 'the mark of the beast'. There's no middle ground. Everyone must choose whether to belong to God, or belong to Satan. There is no other choice.

The 144,000 are sealed "from every tribe of the sons of Israel" (7:4); 12,000 from each tribe are listed. There are a number of lists of Israel's tribes in the Old Testament. But none match this list. And this list has some striking features. For example, Judah is listed first, and Dan is omitted. These features suggest that this list in 7:5-8 is symbolic. In fact, the number 144,000 is itself symbolic: it's a multiple of twelves and tens. As we'll see shortly, 'twelve' is the number associated with God's people—not just Jewish Christians, but *all* Christians. So the 144,000 pictures, not ethnic Israel, but *the complete number of all God's faithful people* in both the Old and

the New Testament periods.

But why are God's people numbered in this way? Let's go back to the Old Testament. Shortly after the Tabernacle was completed, God told Moses, "Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, . . . every male, . . . From twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war . . ." (Numbers 1:2-3). Those counted were men "able to go to war". Another census was taken not long before Israel entered the Promised Land (Numbers 26:1-65). This was mainly to make a fair allocation of the land, but again, it was "all in Israel who are able to go to war" who were counted. David, too, ordered a census—in this case, sinfully (2 Samuel 24:1-17). Again, it was the *soldiers* who were numbered. So this list is telling us that God's people are an *army*. We fight against "the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

A great multitude before the throne (7:9-17)

John has just heard "the number of the sealed, 144,000". Now he sees "a great multitude that no one could number" (7:9). It seems clear that this "great multitude" includes *all* God's faithful people. We've

already concluded that the “144,000” pictures all God’s faithful people. So this “great multitude” is the same as the symbolic “144,000”. But John is now seeing God’s people from a different perspective. The “144,000” are God’s people, from all ages, past, present and future, viewed as an army—in other words, the ‘church militant’—here on Earth. The “great multitude” are God’s people—again, from every age—viewed as the ‘church triumphant’ in Heaven.

This “great multitude” comes “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (7:9). God promised Abraham that his descendants would be “as the dust of the earth” and as countless as the stars (Genesis 13:16, 15:5). God has kept His promise!

In 6:17 we saw terrified unbelievers fleeing from God and asking “who can stand?” Can anyone stand before God? Yes! This multitude are “standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (7:9)! They hold “palm branches”, an accompaniment to joy (see Leviticus 23:40-43, John 12:13), and cry out “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (7:10). The angels, too, prostrate themselves and lift their voices in worship to God.

These believers are “the ones coming out of the great tribulation” (7:14). That great tribulation surely includes *all* the tribulation suffered by God’s people through the whole period from the Day of Pentecost to Jesus’s return. God’s people are shielded from God’s wrath. But they are not shielded from persecution. Through “many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

Then John is told, “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). The “blood” of Jesus stands for His sacrificial death. Through His death, Jesus endured the penalty for our sins. Our penalty is paid; God has declared us ‘not guilty’; *our sins are forgiven*. And we are *released from slavery to sin*. Now we see something else that Jesus’s death achieved. Sin made us *unclean*; but because our sins are forgiven, *we’re clean and pure in God’s sight*. These believers’ robes are “white”—a symbol of purity and victory. These believers are pure. So they have victory over all their enemies.

It is *Jesus’s sacrificial death* that cleanses us from sin. We can’t do *anything* to cleanse ourselves. So why are we told that *these believers “have washed their robes”*? Notice that they have come “out of the great tribulation”. That seems to be the clue.

These believers were saved by God’s grace through *faith* (Ephesians 2:8). But in the great tribulation—in all the suffering and temptation—*they stayed loyal to Jesus*. Their faith has been tested in the fire of affliction and *proved to be genuine* (see 1 Peter 1:6–7). So these

believers *have indeed* done something—they took hold of God’s grace and *remained faithful* to Jesus. That may be why they have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”.

These victorious believers “are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple” (7:15). They’re in God’s presence, serving Him as priests in His temple—as His “holy priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5). God “will shelter them with his presence” (7:15). The ungodly seek shelter *from* God’s presence (6:15-17); God’s people are sheltered *in* His presence! They’ll never suffer or sorrow again. The Lamb “will be their shepherd” (7:17). As their “good shepherd” (John 10:11,14), the Lamb protects them and provides for them; He guides them to “springs of living water” (7:17), water that gives life. This living water pictures eternal life—abundant life in fellowship with God. Here we’re treated to a preview of the final glorious scene of God’s people living in God’s presence in His paradise (21:1-22:5).

The seventh seal opened (8:1,3-5)

The Lamb opens the seventh seal. What will happen now? Something we simply don’t expect: there is “silence in heaven for about half an hour” (8:1). It’s surely the silence of reverent awe: “the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him” (Habakkuk 2:20). The silence holds us in breathless anticipation. What will God do?

Seven trumpets are given to “the seven angels who stand before God”. Another angel is “given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God . . .” (8:3-4). As in 5:8 and 6:9-10, God’s people pray. Perhaps they echo the cry of God’s people in 6:10: “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” In essence, they are surely praying what our Lord taught *us* to pray: “Our Father in heaven, . . . Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9–10).

Then the angel fills the censer with fire from the altar in God’s heavenly Temple and throws it “on the earth”. There are “peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake” (8:5). This echoes the storm we encountered in 4:5. But now it’s accompanied by an earthquake. This storm recalls the dramatic scenes at Mount Sinai described in Exodus 19:16–24 and 20:18-21. Almighty God is manifesting the power of His presence here on Earth. He’s coming to judge the Earth! And so He’s answering His people’s prayers that rise before Him from the altar.



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“Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.” (Revelation 8:5)

Numbers in Revelation

We’ve now travelled a third of our way through Revelation. Something that you’ll have noticed as we’ve travelled is that *Revelation is full of numbers*. These numbers are significant: they all symbolise something. Here are the key numbers we’ll meet, together with what they symbolise:

- ▶ **Two** is the number of *witness*. A minimum of two witnesses was required for a claim to be substantiated in a legal case (Deuteronomy 19:15).
- ▶ **Three** is the number of *the Triune God* – He is three Persons in One.
- ▶ **Four** is the number of *the creation*. For example, there are four main compass points.
- ▶ **Seven** symbolises *completeness and perfection*. ‘Seven’ is God’s number (‘three’) plus creation’s number (‘four’). So seven may especially symbolise God’s complete and perfect activity in the Universe—creating, judging, saving and restoring. For example, on the seventh day God rested from creating the Heavens and the Earth. Judgment, salvation and restoration are key themes in Revelation: this may explain why the number seven occurs so often.
- ▶ **Twelve** is God’s number (‘three’) multiplied by creation’s number (‘four’). It seems to symbolise *organisation*—and so is the number of perfect organisation and government. It especially symbolises God’s Kingdom, and the *community* of God’s Kingdom—the whole company of God’s faithful people both in the Old and New Testaments.
- ▶ **Ten** is the base number of our decimal number system: ten and its multiples (a hundred, a thousand, a million) are ‘round numbers’. So, here in Revelation, ten suggests *a round number*—an unspecified but complete number whose total only God knows.
- ▶ **Six** is *one short* of ‘seven’, which represents completeness and perfection. And so it’s an *incomplete, imperfect* number. So ‘six’ symbolises incompleteness or imperfection.
- ▶ **Three and a half** is half of seven. So this is another number that symbolises *incompleteness*. In Revelation, references to this number relate to *time*, and it’s expressed in different ways. We read of “**three and a half days**” (11:9,11). We also meet synonyms for ‘three and a half years’: “**42 months**”

(Revelation 11:2, 13:5), “1260 days” (Revelation 11:3, 12:6), and “a time, and times, and half a time” (12:14). All these symbolise a limited period during which God’s people suffer tribulation, but are also protected by God from ultimate harm. For example, Israel’s journey through the wilderness is a key

background for Revelation 12:14. Their journey, during which they were sustained by God, is characterised by the number 42. Numbers 33:1-49 lists 42 camping places, and the journey from the Red Sea to the Jordan can be calculated to have lasted 42 years.

The Judgments of the Seven Trumpets (8:2, 8:6-11:19)



Artwork by Pat Marvenko Smith © 1982, 1992 www.revelationillustrated.com

“Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them” (Revelation 8:2)

Six trumpets sounded (8:2, 8:6-9:21)

Judgment on land and rivers, sea and sky (8:2,6-13)

In 7:2-3 we read that “the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea” were told not to harm the Earth, sea or trees “until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.” God’s people are now sealed—they belong to God, and enjoy His protection (7:1-8). So, following the prayers of His people, God sends judgments upon the world.

Like the judgments of the seven seals, the first four trumpet judgments are a quartet; then follow two that are portrayed in more detail. The seventh seems to bring us to the end of the age. There’s an interlude between the sixth and seventh judgments, as there was between the sixth and seventh seal judgments.

The first four trumpet judgments afflict the earth, sea, fresh waters, and sky—in other words, the whole of the natural world. A third of the earth and the trees, along with all the green grass are “burned up”. A third of the sea becomes blood; a third of the sea creatures die, and a third of the ships are destroyed. A third of the fresh waters become “wormwood” (a bitter-tasting shrub); many people die from the water. Finally, a third of the light from the heavenly bodies—sun, moon and stars—is extinguished.

These judgments are described in *symbolic* language.

We don’t know exactly how they impact this world. But what *is* clear is that God, in part, withdraws His blessing from this world. This allows human incompetence and sin to disrupt life to a correspondingly greater extent. On top of this, God dispenses—in various ways and on various occasions—*direct* judgment on this rebellious world. Social disorder and crime, political turmoil, economic instability, and war all escalate. Food production, fresh water supply, trade (much of which is transported in ships), and military seapower: all are thrown into disarray. Things fall apart. And—pictured by the dimming of sun, moon and stars—a dark shadow falls on human society, a shadow of confusion, foreboding and fear.

What is God doing here? He is ravaging every means by which mankind can live securely and comfortably without Him. God is bringing people to their senses, driving home the fact that He is God, that He has first claim on their lives, that they cannot live apart from Him. In His great mercy, God wants people to turn from their sin, and cry out to Him for salvation.

Three of these judgments echo the Egyptian plagues. The first judgment releases “hail and fire, mixed with blood”, recalling the seventh Egyptian plague (Exodus 9:23). The second turns the sea into blood, recalling the first Egyptian plague (Exodus 7:20-21). The fourth darkens a third of the sky, recalling the ninth Egyptian plague (Exodus 10:21-23). God is doing here what He was doing in Egypt. Pharaoh was considered by the Egyptians to be responsible for maintaining order in the natural world. The Egyptian plagues proved that Pharaoh *didn’t* have this power; only God did. God was more powerful than Pharaoh, and more powerful than the Egyptian gods. As then, so now. God is demonstrating to rebellious mankind who is actually in control of this world, and whom they must worship and trust.

The locusts from the pit (8:13-9:11)

An eagle flies overhead, shrieking “Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!” (8:13). The first four judgments impacted the natural world that people depended on; people suffered and died as a result. Now God turns up the heat. The next

two judgments fall directly upon the sinners themselves.

The fifth angel blows his trumpet. A star, almost certainly an angel, opens **“the Abyss”** (9:2 NIV)—the source and home of evil. From the Abyss billow clouds of smoke, darkening both sun and sky. Out from the smoke swarm hordes of nightmarish hybrid creatures—locusts like battle horses wearing what seem like crowns, with faces like humans, hair like women’s hair, teeth like those of lions, clad with breastplates, their wings thundering like war-chariots charging into battle. We recoil in horror. Their king is **“the angel of the Abyss”**; called **“Abaddon”** in Hebrew and **“Apollyon”** in Greek (9:11 NIV), meaning respectively, ‘destruction’ and ‘one who destroys’. This king seems to be a high-ranking evil angel.

Locusts don’t harm people. But they eat all the vegetation in sight—like the locusts of the eighth Egyptian plague (Exodus 10:12-15), which this judgment reminds us of. In contrast, these locusts are commanded not to eat the vegetation, but to torment **“those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads”** (9:4)—that is, unbelievers. But God’s faithful people are safe from these horrors.

These creatures have **“tails and stings like scorpions”** (9:10); they’re **“allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them”** (9:5). Their torment is like the sting of a scorpion. The earth-dwellers long for death to release them from this unbearable agony.

But notice that the angel is **“given”** the key; the locusts are **“given”** power, are **“told”** not to harm vegetation, but only people without God’s seal, and are **“allowed”** to torment these people, but not to kill them. Who is doing the giving, the telling and the allowing? It is God. This plague, though executed by Satanic hordes, is actually the judgment of God. God *Himself* is in control. This plague recalls Joel’s vision of God’s judgment on **“the day of the LORD”**, a day envisioned as an invasion of a great locust army (Joel 2:1-11). The pain inflicted by these monster locusts is excruciating. But it lasts only for **“five months”**—symbolising a limited period of time. God is being merciful.

The four angels from the Euphrates (9:12-19)

Then the sixth angel blows his trumpet. A voice from the golden altar commands the release of **“the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates”** (9:13-14). These angels, **“prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year”**—in other words, the exact moment appointed by God—are released **“to kill a third of mankind”** (9:15). The upper Euphrates was the eastern boundary of the Promised Land (Genesis 15:18, 1 Kings 4:21,24-25). Over this boundary the Assyrians,

and then the Babylonians, invaded to bring God’s judgment on His people. Centuries later, the Euphrates was the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. Beyond it lived the Parthians, feared by the Romans. Crossing this river symbolised enemy invasion.

A vast army of **“mounted troops”**, numbering ‘200 million’, bears down upon this world—perhaps led by these four angels. The fifth trumpet blast unleashed a horrifying locust plague. Now we see a horde that outdoes even them in terrifying menace (9:16-17). They wear **“breastplates the colour of fire and of sapphire and of sulphur”**. The heads of the horses are like **“lions’ heads”**; **“fire and smoke and sulphur came out of their mouths”**. This is nothing less than a preview of **“the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death”** (21:8), the destiny of the wicked. But the power of the horses is not only in their mouths, devastating as this is; **“their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound”** (9:19).

But, as always, God is in control. In His mercy, the slaughter is limited. Through **“three plagues”**—the fire, the smoke, and the sulphur—**“a third of mankind”** (9:18) is killed. Only by God’s grace is the slaughter not total.

What are we to make of these two plagues—the plagues of the locusts and the mounted troops? They clearly picture demonic forces allied to Satan. Like Satan, they torment all who are created in God’s image—even those who are ‘on their own side’, who follow Satan! They do this by any means they can—through things like the suffering inflicted on people by satanic ideologies and brutal tyrants, occult practices, pagan idolatry, addictions, and possession by evil spirits.

Remember: if these unbelievers don’t repent, they’ll be subjected to demonic attack far worse than this for all eternity. *And our merciful God does not want that.* He’s allowing them to experience a foretaste of hell, a chance to wake up to the reality of what they must face for all eternity, before it’s too late. He longs for them to repent of their rebellion, and turn to Him for salvation.

And remember what God said to those churches tempted to compromise with this world. He called them to repent (2:16, 21-22, 3:3,19). God wanted them to read about these judgments. This world—the very world they themselves were consorting with—was under God’s judgment. It was facing eternal ruin.

“Nor did they repent” (9:20-21)

But the **“rest of mankind”** who survive this sixth plague do not **“repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshipping demons and idols . . . nor . . . their**

murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts" (9:20-21). Our merciful God holds out His hand of mercy to them, and they defy Him to His face. What will it take to turn them from their sin? We shall see.

The little scroll (10:1-11)

The seven thunders (10:1-4)

John sees "another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire" (10:1). This angel reminds us of how God (in 4:3) and Jesus (in 1:7,15-16) are described. But this angel, it seems, isn't Jesus, but a special angelic messenger. In his hand is a little scroll, open.

This angel has one foot on the sea and the other on land. To have things under one's feet symbolises having authority over them. The sea and the land together represent the whole created world. This angel is God's angel; it's God who has authority over His creation, over all who live in it, and over all the Satanic forces that seek to rule it.

This mighty angel calls with a roar like a lion. Seven thunders boom out. But a voice from heaven forbids John to record what they say. These are probably another set of seven judgments. Perhaps God didn't carry them out. Perhaps He did, but He hasn't revealed what they were, because we don't need to know.^[6]

The completion of God's mystery (10:5-7)

The angel swears by the eternal Creator God that there will be "no more delay" but that when the seventh trumpet sounds "the mystery of God" will be fulfilled, "just as he announced to his servants the prophets" (10:5-7). "The kingdom of the world" will then become "the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (11:15).

What is "the mystery of God"? It's the wonderfully unexpected way in which God is completing His plan of salvation and judgment. Key aspects of that mystery are:

- God's salvation was accomplished through *the death of the Lamb* (see 5:9). The proclamation of "Christ crucified" is "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23): it runs counter to all natural human expectations! And even to God's faithful Old Testament people, God's wonderful plan was still not clear. God revealed *something* of it to them, but only in part (compare Ephesians 3:5).

Christ's death appeared to be a defeat. But it was a glorious victory! Through His death, Jesus crushed

all the forces of evil, and "ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9).

- And God's salvation is proclaimed by His suffering people. God's people suffer, and sometimes even die, in their witness for the Lord. They appear defeated. Yet their apparent defeat is actually their victory—as we'll see in 11:7-12. Instead, it's their *enemies* who are defeated. *This* may be the aspect of the "mystery" particularly in focus here—that's suggested by what we read shortly, in 11:1-13.

Christ's apparent defeat is His victory. His people's apparent defeat is their victory. Through the Cross, and through the proclamation of the Cross by His suffering people, God is completing His plan of salvation and judgment. No-one could have anticipated all the details of God's wonderful plan before He revealed it in the pages of the New Testament (compare Ephesians 3:1-6). It really *is* mystery upon mystery!

The sweet and bitter scroll (10:8-11)

The voice from heaven commands John to take the scroll. The angel says, "Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey." (10:9). It is sweet to taste, but bitter to digest.

Is this scroll the same one that the Lamb unsealed (5:7-10)? They're certainly closely related. The scroll that the Lamb unsealed contains *God's plan to save people from all nations and to restore the Earth through His Messiah*. This little scroll may well focus specially on *the role of God's people in this plan*. They're sent into all the world to make disciples of all nations (see Matthew 28:18-20). As they do so, they suffer attack; yet ultimately they're victorious over their enemies. That may well explain why the scroll is sweet to taste but bitter in the stomach. The gospel is good news; it's sweet as honey. To proclaim it is pure delight (compare Psalm 119:103, Jeremiah 15:16). But proclaiming it to the world brings persecution, suffering, even death—as we'll soon see. It will be bitter when it's digested.

Then John is told, "You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings." (10:11). John is to prophesy to his readers—including you and me—things concerning many peoples and rulers. God's people are to go "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8), and proclaim the gospel of salvation and judgment to everyone.

Remember what we read a short while ago: "The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent . . ." (9:20). God has sent judgments on mankind, but they remain hardened in rebellion. But we've also read that, by His blood, Jesus "ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and

people and nation" (5:9). What a contrast! How were such a multitude ransomed? Through the preaching of the gospel! And that's what God draws our attention to now. God sends judgments. Now we see Him sending *people*—His faithful witnesses.



God's people are to go "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8), and proclaim the gospel of salvation and judgment to everyone.

The Church's prophetic witness (11:1-13)

Then John is given "a measuring rod" and told: "measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there" (11:1). This "temple" is God's people (1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 2 Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 2:19-22) in the presence of God. The "altar and those who worship there" are also images of God's people in His presence.

Why is John told to *measure* them? Measuring symbolises that the temple and the altar and the worshippers belong to God. They are His people. *He will protect them.*

But John wasn't to measure "the court outside the temple . . . for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months" (11:2). The "court outside the temple" and "the holy city" are also images of God's people. *But now we're seeing them from a different perspective, a different 'camera angle'.* They are *unmeasured*. In other words, *now we're viewing them as vulnerable to persecution.* The "nations" will trample "the holy city"—unbelievers and godless powers will assault believers by persecuting them or drawing them to compromise. We saw this in the messages to the seven churches.

But though God's people may suffer terribly, *godless people and powers cannot destroy them.* We know that, because we *also* see them as those who are *measured*. God will protect them from ultimate harm. God's people will triumph over Satan and his forces.

This period of 42 months is one of the numbers we looked at earlier. It symbolises a limited period during which God's people suffer tribulation and oppression,

but during which God protects them from ultimate harm. Two other numbers in this chapter symbolise the same thing: "1260 days" (11:3) and "three and a half days" (11:9,11).

Then a divine voice (probably God's, but perhaps Christ's) declares, "I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth" (11:3). These witnesses are "the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth" (11:4). This imagery is drawn from Zechariah 4:2-14. There we learn that a "lampstand" seems to represent God's presence among His people, and "two anointed ones", linked with "two olive trees", probably represent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Here in 11:3-4, the 'two witnesses' prophesy to the nations—they're clothed in sackcloth because they call the nations to repentance. There are two because, as we saw earlier, two is the number of *witness*. And the 'two lampstands' represent God's people, who stand in His presence. (In 1:20, of course, "seven lampstands" represent seven individual local churches, a similar picture). God is telling John that He will grant His church authority to bear witness—to proclaim the gospel—to the nations.

While bearing witness, "fire pours from their mouth" and consumes anyone trying to harm them (11:5). This recalls Elijah calling down fire on the soldiers whom King Ahaziah sent to capture him (2 Kings 1:10-12). It also recalls what the Lord said to Jeremiah: "I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them" (Jeremiah 5:14). They can bring about a drought, recalling the drought that Elijah prayed for (1 Kings 17:1, James 5:17). And they can turn waters into blood and "strike the earth with every kind of plague" (11:6), recalling the plagues that God sent on Egypt through Moses (for example, Exodus 7:20). God gave power to these Old Testament prophets. Now He gives power to His New Testament people. These calamities—drought, water turned to blood, and fire—aren't literal:

- The fire from their mouth seems to picture *the proclamation of God's judgment* on their enemies.
- Their power to cause drought and to turn the waters into blood symbolises *God's judgments themselves*. What these judgments are we don't know, but they'll have huge impact on this godless world. The latter judgment—the power to turn the waters into blood—recalls the third trumpet judgment, and also the second and third bowl plague (which we'll meet later).

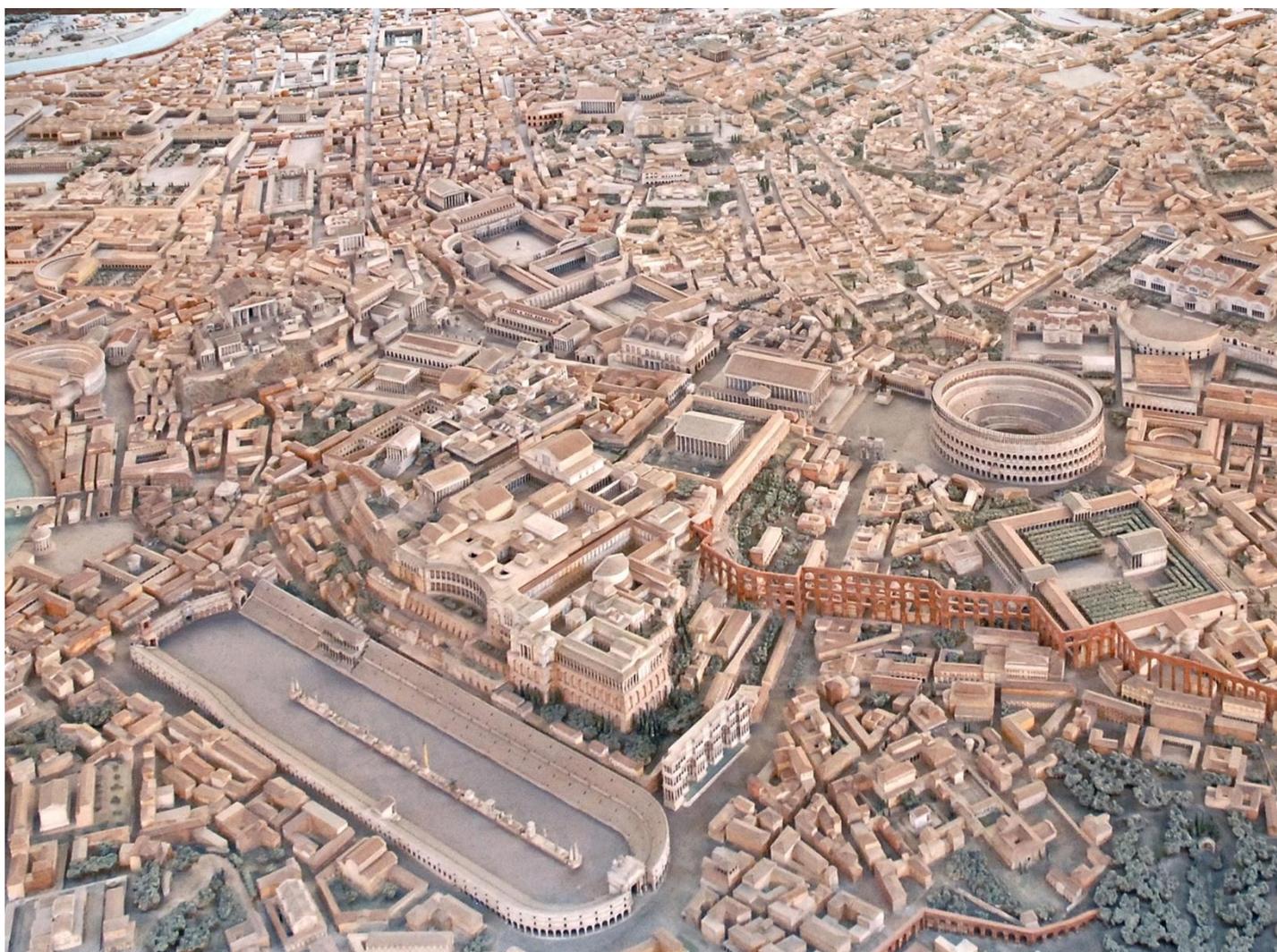
God empowers His faithful people to call people to repentance and faith in Him. And He empowers them to prophesy about His judgment on unrepentant sinners; their prophetic word calls down God's

judgments—*judgments designed to warn people of the coming final judgment (20:11-15), to wake them up to the folly of living without Him, of resisting His offer of eternal life.*

But **“when they have finished their testimony”** the tables are turned: **“the beast”** from **“the Abyss will . . . kill them”** (11:7 NIV). We learn a lot about this beast in 13:1-10 and 17:1-18. It seems to picture every government or power that has ever asserted itself against God and His people.

Worse is to come: for **“three and a half days”** their dead bodies will lie in **“the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified”** (11:8). This **“great city”** is mentioned several times later in Revelation (16:19, 17:18,

18:10,16,18,19,21); there it is **“Babylon”**. In John’s day, that **“great city”** was epitomised by Rome, which Peter actually calls **“Babylon”** (1 Peter 5:13). But here Jesus calls it **“Sodom”**, the depraved city of Genesis 13:13, and **“Egypt”**, the nation that held God’s people captive (Exodus 1:8-14). Our Lord was crucified in this city. Historically, He was crucified at Jerusalem. Spiritually, He was crucified in **“the great city”**. This great city of many names represents human society in rebellion against God. Jewish leaders and the crowd condemned Jesus; Roman authorities crucified Him. But they were simply representatives of rebellious humanity, citizens in that time and place of that **“great city”**. This city was conceived when Adam and Eve first sinned; it will collapse into ruin at the end of history—as we’ll see in session 6.



General view of the model of ancient Rome by Italo Gismondi © Jean-Pierre Dalbéra on Wikimedia Commons (CC BY 2.0)

A detailed model of the city of Rome at the time of Constantine I, who was Emperor from AD 306 to 337, made by the archaeologist Italo Gismondi. Notable buildings include the Colosseum (towards the right) and the Circus Maximus, the chariot racing stadium and mass entertainment venue (in the foreground). In John’s day, **“the great city”** (Revelation 11:8) was epitomised by Rome.

Some **“from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations”** will stare at the two witnesses’ bodies, even dishonouring them by refusing them burial. Unbelievers, their enemies **“who dwell on the earth”**, will celebrate, because these prophets had tormented them (11:9-10).

Again, the tables are turned. After the ‘three and a half

days’, **“a breath of life from God”** enters them; these witnesses stand up (11:11). Terror falls on those watching. Then a loud voice calls to these witnesses **“Come up here!”**; and they ascend **“in a cloud”** into heaven (11:12)—the cloud being a sign of God’s presence, and thus of God’s acceptance. Their enemies can only watch them ascend.

God's people remain dead for only 'three and a half days'. This period reminds us of the period of 'three and a half years' that we've already met ("42 months" in 11:2, and "1260 days" in 11:3). In fact, it's probably the same period of time symbolised by the 'three and a half years'. If so, why only days, rather than years? This surely emphasises that their enemies' triumph is short-lived and insignificant.

God raises his faithful witnesses from the dead! Every believer will either be raised from the dead or "be caught up . . . to meet the Lord" when He comes again (1 Thessalonians 4:17). But there's surely a wider application. Even in the midst of tribulation—perhaps even *especially* then—believers experience resurrection life. Paul testified to this. He writes, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; . . . For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." (2 Corinthians 4:8,11). We believers enjoy resurrection life in the midst of suffering. Unbelievers see this and marvel!

And on an even broader scale, how many times has persecution so decimated the church in a particular region that it appeared to have been extinguished? And yet it has sprung back to life. Tertullian (a Christian who lived around 155-220 AD) wrote: "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed." Recall what we said earlier: though God's people may suffer terribly, *godless people and powers cannot destroy them*. God will protect them from ultimate harm. They'll triumph over Satan and his forces.

Finally, a great earthquake shakes the city and "a tenth of the city" falls (11:13). "Seven thousand people" are killed in that earthquake; the rest are terror-struck, and give "glory to the God of heaven" (11:13). We have arrived at the end of this age. The seventh trumpet is shortly to sound.

Do these people really repent, or are they just brought to acknowledge God without actually repenting? This is debated. But this chapter focuses on the preaching of the gospel, which is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, . . ." (Romans 1:16). That powerful gospel, proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit, bears fruit throughout the world (see Colossians 1:5-6). Surely what we see here is the fruit of the gospel—true repentance and conversion.

We saw how, after the six trumpet judgments, the people "who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent . . ." (9:20). We asked: what will it take to turn people from their sin? *It takes the proclamation of the gospel in the power of the Spirit*. And notice, too, that only "a tenth of the city"—the city that represents

godless human society—falls. It seems that many, many people respond to the gospel.

"He shall reign for ever and ever!" (11:14-19)

Two woes have been unleashed; the third "is soon to come" (11:14). The seventh angel blows his trumpet, heralding this third woe. What calamities will this woe unleash?

To our surprise, no catastrophe sweeps the Earth. Instead, loud voices in Heaven proclaim, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (11:15)—one of the verses that Handel included in the *Hallelujah* chorus in his *Messiah*. Countless times, God's people have prayed "Our Father . . . Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:9-10). *Now God's kingdom has come!*

The elders respond; their praises resound through the courts of Heaven. Prostrating themselves before God's throne, they worship Him, saying, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign" (11:17). They acclaim Him as the One "who is and who was", but not also as 'who is to come'. Why? Because, it seems, the end *has* now come.

The elders continue: "The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth." (11:18). The last judgment is here! God's faithful people—beset by temptation and persecution—are now to receive their eternal reward. And the "destroyers of the earth"—Satan and all the forces of evil—who have brought humanity to ruin and oppressed God's people—are themselves to be destroyed. We'll see how in the chapters that follow.

God's temple opened (11:19)

Then "God's temple in heaven" is "opened", revealing "the ark of his covenant" (11:19). The ark of the covenant was in the Most Holy Place in the Tabernacle and in Solomon's Temple. It was a wooden box overlaid with gold, on which was a golden slab called the "mercy seat" or "atonement cover" (Exodus 25:17 ESV and NIV respectively). God was enthroned above the cherubim (for example, 2 Kings 19:15); the mercy seat was His footstool (1 Chronicles 28:2).

Nobody could enter or even see inside the Most Holy Place, except the High Priest, and then only on the

annual Day of Atonement. That room was closed off by a curtain. Here, however, the curtain is removed and we see the ark.

But why has God opened that room? In the earthly Tabernacle and Temple, God had been present above the ark. Here, in this vision, *God manifests His presence on Earth in all His power and majesty*. And, as before, His presence is attended by a storm—“*flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail*” (Revelation 11:19, compare 4:5 and 8:5). The end of this age has come. The Day of Judgment has dawned.

What’s the significance of the ark here? It was a symbol of God’s presence. And in the ark were the two tablets

engraved with the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 10:1-5). These commandments were the key decrees of the covenant between God and His people. Through this covenant, God bound Himself to His people, and them to Him (see, for example, Exodus 6:7). The sight of the ark heralds the time when God will finally and fully fulfil His covenant with His people. He’ll dwell with them forever on the New Earth (21:3).

For His faithful people, the presence of God on Earth is what they have longed and earnestly prayed for (6:10, 8:3-4). But for “*those who dwell on the earth*”, who follow Satan, the presence of God will be terrifying (see 6:15-16). For them it will mean judgment—it will be “*the third woe*”.

The Judgments of the Seven Bowls (15:1, 15:5-16:21)



Artwork by Pat Marvenko Smith © 1982, 1992 www.revelationillustrated.com

“out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests” (Revelation 15:6)

The seven angels from God’s sanctuary (15:1,5-8)

As we said earlier, the next part of the book (12:1-14:20 together with 15:2-4) is a separate section—a story within the story. We’ll look at that in the next session.

A third set of judgments are unleashed on Earth. These are “*the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished*” (Revelation 15:1).

These plagues are “*the last*” that John sees. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re the last chronologically. As we’ve seen, all three sets of judgments seem to take us through *the whole period of history* from Jesus’s first coming to His Second Coming—a period that the Bible calls the “*last days*”.

John sees “*another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues*” (15:1). He then sees God’s faithful people singing the “*the song of Moses,*

the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb” (15:2-4). We’ll learn about this song in our next session.

Then “*the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven*” is opened (15:5). That word “*sanctuary*” can also be translated “*temple*” (as it is, for example, in the NIV). The earthly Tabernacle (and the Temple that superseded it) housed the ark containing the tablets of the Law. These tablets were God’s witness, or “*testimony*” (Exodus 25:16,21). They bore witness to the covenant God had made with His people Israel—the covenant whose ten key laws were written on these tablets. So the sanctuary (in other words, the Tabernacle or Temple) is called “*the tent of witness*” (compare Exodus 30:26,36, 38:21).

But the nations reject God’s law. And they reject Jesus Christ, the One Who fulfilled that Law. God justly brings judgment upon them. And so follow the seven “*last*” plagues.

The seven angels emerge from the Temple in Heaven. One of the four living creatures gives these angels “*seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever*” (5:7). The Temple is “*filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power*” (5:8)—God manifests His glory and power. Our glorious, almighty God now unleashes His righteous judgment upon a sin-soaked world.

The first four bowl judgments (16:1-9)

A loud voice from the Temple commands the angels, “*Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God*” (16:1). Like the other sets of judgments, the first four bowl judgments are a quartet; then follow two more. The seventh seems to bring us to the end of the age. But unlike the other two sets, there’s no interlude between the sixth and seventh judgment.

The first four angels empty their bowls over the Earth, the sea, “the rivers and the springs of water” and the sun (16:2-9)—in other words, the whole of creation. This mirrors the scope of the first four trumpet plagues. The first plague inflicts “harmful and painful sores” on “the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshipped its image”—that is, those who are opposed to God. The second makes the sea “like the blood of a corpse”; “every living thing” in the sea dies. The third turns “the rivers and the springs of water” into blood. The fourth allows the sun “to scorch people with fire”. Three of these plagues (like three of the trumpet judgments) recall Egyptian plagues—in this case, the sixth (Exodus 9:8-10) and the first (Exodus 7:20-21).

Notice the differences between these and the corresponding trumpet judgments. Those judgments afflicted a third of creation. But we’re not told of any limit to the bowl judgments. We may assume they afflict the whole Earth.

Something else stands out, too. Under the second trumpet judgment, a third of the ships were destroyed (and presumably their crew). Under the third, many people *died*. Through these bowl plagues, God inflicts agony and distress. But—though they’ll surely lead to the deaths of many people—they *don’t seem to kill anyone directly* (unless “every living thing . . . in the sea” includes humans, but this seems unlikely).

God is *devastating civilisation*. He’s allowing human sin to wreak greater havoc. But God isn’t being cruel or vindictive. These plagues are His *righteous judgment*. The angel in charge of the waters declares: “Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!” (16:5-6).

Our God is righteous in judgment. We’d expect these plagues to kill many—more, in fact, than the trumpet judgments killed. After all, it would only be fair and just. But that doesn’t happen.

God is full of mercy. We see this time and again in Revelation. Through these plagues—as with the first four trumpet judgments—God is ravaging every means by which mankind can live securely and comfortably without Him. He’s showing people that they cannot build a civilisation without Him. Without God, all human efforts come to nothing. God is showing mankind who is Lord of this world, who it is they must worship and trust.

God wants people to repent and turn to Him for salvation. Recall what Ezekiel prophesied to God’s own nation Israel: “As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the

wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11).

But, resolutely rebellious, people refuse to repent. After being scorched by the sun, “they cursed the name of God . . . They did not repent and give him glory” (16:9).

And so we come to the final bowl judgments.

The judgment on the beast’s throne (16:10-11)

The fifth angel empties his bowl “on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores.” (16:10-11). As we saw earlier, this beast seems to picture every government or power that has ever asserted itself against God and His people. Its “kingdom” is elsewhere called the “kingdom of the world” (11:15); it’s a satanic counterfeit of “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (11:15).

The darkness mirrors the ninth Egyptian plague (Exodus 10:21-23). In John’s Gospel we read, “people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” (John 3:19). But now God plunges them into spiritual darkness. This darkness is terrible and agonising—a foretaste of the outer darkness of Hell, where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 22:13). But *still* they refuse to repent.

Gathering at Armageddon (16:12-16)

The sixth angel empties his bowl “on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east” (16:12). Out of the mouths of “the dragon”, “the beast”, and “the false prophet” spew “three unclean spirits like frogs”. These are “demonic spirits, performing signs” (16:13-14). We encountered the Euphrates river in 9:14: it symbolises enemy invasion. Satan and his forces lure the rulers of this world to the final, decisive battle against God.

But God *Himself* has set the date for that battle. As always, God is in full control. This battle is scheduled for “the great day of God the Almighty” (16:14). We read about this “day” many times in the Bible—it’s referred to in various ways, including “that day” (for example, 2 Thessalonians 2:3), “the day of the Lord” (for example Isaiah 13:9), and “the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). On that great day, God will save His people, defeat and judge His enemies, and rule the world with righteousness and justice. He’ll do all this through His Messiah, Jesus.

Jesus inaugurated that “day” in His death and resurrection. He’ll consummate it at His Second

Coming, when He returns to Earth **“like a thief”** (16:15). And between these two climactic events are the **“last days”**, during which we’re to stay awake, keep alert and live as those who are ready for our Lord’s return (see also Matthew 24:42-44).



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The ruins of the ancient city of Megiddo, in Israel.

And so, oblivious of their approaching doom, **“the kings of the whole world”** march to the place called **“Armageddon”** (16:14,16). This name has passed into language and legend as the apocalyptic battle of the end times. But what does it mean?

- The most widely accepted view is ‘mountain of Megiddo’. Megiddo was a fortified city in Northern Palestine (see the image above). The **“waters of Megiddo”** (Judges 5:19) and the plain of Megiddo (2 Kings 23:29-30) were the sites of battles that God’s people fought. Through history, many other battles have been fought at and near that site. But the fortified city of Megiddo was not a mountain. So where did the idea of a mountain come from? It probably came from Ezekiel’s prophecy of Gog and Magog (38:1-39:29). This foretells the final attack by the forces of evil on God’s people in the latter times – a battle that will take place on **“the mountains of Israel”** (38:8, 39:2,4,17). In fact, John draws on this prophecy to depict the final battle of Satan and his forces against God’s people (Revelation 20:7-10). Zechariah also prophesies about **“all the nations of the earth”** gathering against God’s city Jerusalem **“on that day”** (Zechariah 12:1-13:1). He actually refers to Megiddo in this prophecy. But though all this is the most likely background, Armageddon is not a geographical location. It’s a *spiritual* location.
- Another suggestion is that **“Armageddon”** is derived from the Hebrew *har mō’ēd*, meaning ‘mount of assembly’. God chose a mountain, Mount Zion, as His dwelling place. Symbolically, He lives there with His people (Hebrews 12:22-23). So again, Armageddon is a *spiritual*, not a geographical, location.

Either way, Armageddon symbolises the place where **“the kings of the whole world”** converge to attack God and His people at the end of this age. The battle of Armageddon is the final assault of the forces of evil against God and His people. We don’t know how this battle will play out in earthly terms. It must inevitably involve violence—God’s people will doubtless suffer physical persecution, and even death. But it’s essentially a *spiritual* battle. Here in 16:12-16, we don’t see the battle itself. But we do see the *preparations* for the battle. We see the actual battle in 19:11-21 and again in 20:7-10.

“It is done!” (16:17-21)

Now we’re shown what concludes this battle—the final destruction of Satan’s kingdom. The seventh angel empties his bowl **“into the air”** and God declares **“It is done!”** (16:17). God’s almighty presence is again attended by a storm—more violent than any we’ve met before (compare 4:5, 8:5 and 11:19). He has come to judge the world. The islands flee, and the mountains vanish (compare 6:14, 20:11). The **“great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath”** (16:19). These cities symbolise mankind’s godless civilisation under Satan’s domination. In His righteous wrath, God demolishes them. This godless world collapses into ruin. But, to the end, people defy God: they curse Him (16:21, compare 16:9,11).

The end of this age has come. But the story continues. In session six, we’ll see the events of the end of this age played out in ‘slow motion’ step by step, scene by scene.

Footnotes

- [1] See *The Overcomers: Discovering Hope in the Book of Revelation*, Second Edition, pages 131-132. Published by Jordan Publishing, Anderson, Indiana, undated.
- [2] See *Our God Reigns! An Amillennial Commentary on Revelation* by Sam Storms, pages 213-217. Published by Mentor, an imprint of Christian Focus Publications Ltd., Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland, United Kingdom, in 2024.
- [3] See *The Book of Revelation: the Seen and the Unseen: Sermons by Bernard Bell 2001-2007*, page 50. Published by Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, Cupertino, California. Published online at <https://pbcc.org/learning/archived-teachings/series/>. Accessed 12 April 2013.
- [4] Quoted from *The Indwelling Life of Christ* by Major W. Ian Thomas, page 37. Published by Multnomah Books, Colorado Springs, Colorado, in 2006.
- [5] Quoted from *The Cross of Christ, 20th Anniversary Edition* by John Stott, page 202. Published by Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, UK, in 2006.
- [6] See *Revelation (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)*, by Grant R. Osborne, page 398. Published by Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 2002.