

EARTH'S LAST TRIAL

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Revelation surveys God's solution to the crisis of history; how he will bring about the long promised world of peace and blessing. After centuries of patient waiting and putting up with might-is-right arrogance, hate, greed and the bloodshed that has characterized our earth so long, God says there comes a time when he will call a halt to the whole rotten business! Eugene Peterson, with his gift of eloquence, has put it this way:

"Surely, after all these centuries it is time to ... call the perpetrators of these cruelties on the carpet and wipe the condescending smiles off their faces with a once-for-all judgment."

This is the time when the great cry of the oppressed of all ages is finally answered: "How long, O Lord, how long?"

We will find the final series of judgments from God in Chapters 15 and 16.

I don't know how you feel but I find it a real relief to come to something more significant than the great broccoli crisis that has occupied official Washington in recent days! Earlier we sang, "Rise up, O men of God, have done with lesser things." That seems most appropriate since a discussion of the merits of broccoli is hardly of worldwide significance today.

The pouring out of the seven bowls of the wrath of God is the third of a series of sevens that has formed the structure of this book. It is introduced to us here by a great sign which John sees in heaven:

I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues -- last, because with them God's wrath is completed. And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb:

**"Great and marvelous are your deeds,
Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways,
King of the ages.
Who will not fear you, O Lord,
and bring glory to your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship before you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed." {Rev 15:1-4 NIV}**

The first thing to notice here is the promise from God that this is the last of the series of judgments. We have reached a turning point of history when we come to these seven bowls of God's wrath. God will then begin to set up his kingdom upon the earth.

In this scene John describes a great host of martyrs, men and women who have given up their lives under the Antichrist, the beast of Chapter 13, and they are now seen in heaven standing on the sea of glass or crystal (not beside it, as the NIV says). We first saw this sea of glass in Chapter 4, and there we understood it to be a symbol of the Spirit of holiness, especially of the righteous holiness which the Spirit imparts to those who come to Christ. That is the only basis for man to appear before the presence of God. We would not dare to stand in his holy presence if we did not stand on a holiness which is given to us. Here it is described as "mixed with fire," because it is a holiness manifested in the midst of persecution.

These martyrs are said to be "victorious over the beast." I love that way of putting it. As you view this scene of martyrdom and judgment, it looks as though when these men and women leave the earth they are losers -- but when they arrive in heaven they are victors! It is a wonderful revelation of how God works far differently from man. Man is under the illusion that what he sees happening is actually according to the way he views it, but it really is not. The Antichrist thinks he is getting rid of his enemies down here, but what he is really doing is running a shuttle service to heaven! He is but an elevator boy in God's service, taking loads of saints up to glory. He does not realize that God is using him for the very purposes that he has ordained.

This host of martyrs sings two songs, the Song of Moses (recorded in Exodus 15 as the Israelites came out of Egypt and crossed the Red Sea), and the song we have just read together, the Song of the Lamb here in Revelation 15. These songs are the first and last songs, so described, in Scripture, and both of them are a description of the deliverance of God's people by divine power, based upon a blood redemption. When Moses and the Israelites sang the Song of Moses they were looking back to the blood of a lamb put over the lintels of the doorposts to keep them safe when the Angel of Death passed through the land of Egypt. Here the martyrs are praising God and honoring him for the divine power that has delivered them from the wrath of the Antichrist, based on the blood of redemption shed by the Lamb of God.

The striking thing about this Song of the Lamb is, there is not one single word about their own achievements! They do not ever say, "O Lord, how faithful we have been to you! How true we have been to your word! How steadfastly we have endured!" The only pronouns used in the song are "your" and "you" -- "Great and marvelous are *your* deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are *your* ways, King of the ages (or King of the nations). Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to *your* name? For *you* alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before *you*, for *your* righteous acts have been revealed." When you stand in the presence of God you will not feel that you have done anything. You will simply be grateful -- grateful beyond words -- for what God has done for you.

From Verse 5 to the end of this brief chapter the seven angels proceed to the final judgment.

After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of Testimony, was opened. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed. {Rev 15:5-8 NIV}

This is an awesome scene, very much like the one that Isaiah describes in his 6th chapter, where he cries, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted and the train of his robe filled the temple," {Isa 6:1 NIV}. He heard the seraphim call, and "at the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke." It was a most awesome sight. Here also, John sees the great temple in heaven open and the seven angels file out of the Holy of Holies, bearing the seven bowls of the wrath of God.

We are told that this smoke symbolizes the powerful glory of God -- it is "smoke from the glory of God and from his power." I wondered as I read that if this is the origin of the expression, "Holy Smoke." At any rate it fills the great temple so no one can enter until the work of the angels is completed. Again, that is symbolic. What does it mean? I am afraid what it means is that it is too late to pray! By faith and by prayer we can enter into the presence of God in his temple, but here it has become impossible. The time has come when men can no longer repent. It is too late to pray when this judgment scene begins.

In Chapter 16, the seven angels pour out their bowls in rapid succession. It is a terrible time of judgment, the most intensive period of tribulation the world has ever seen. It is what several of the Old Testament prophets call "The Great and Terrible day of the Lord." It is what Jesus referred to in the Olivet Discourse, in Matthew 24, when he said, "If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive," {Matt 24:22 NIV}. No one! All the population of the world would have been destroyed. It is a brief, intense period which comes at the close of the last 3-1/2 years of the Great Tribulation. As we go through this passage you will notice that

it covers the same areas of judgment as the trumpets do. In other words, it is an intensification of the judgment of the trumpets which we have already seen.

Let us look at these quickly now.

Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, "Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth."

The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. {Rev 16:1-2 NIV}

As under the trumpet judgments, these visitations are both literal and symbolic. They actually do occur as described, but they have a hidden meaning as well. They reveal something that otherwise would be unknown. The land that the first bowl is poured out on, as we have already seen, represents Israel. There will be a judgment within the land of Israel. It indicates that this falls upon apostate Jews who follow the beast, who are deceived by his lies and propaganda and who accept him as the Messiah. The judgment is in the form of sores -- painful and ugly boils that break out all over the body.

For a time, as a young man, I had a series of boils on my body, and I remember well how terribly painful and ugly they were.

These sores break out suddenly and without apparent cause. We are seeing foreshadows of such today, as for instance, the great plague of AIDS which has come suddenly upon our world. No one knew of it before; it suddenly appeared. These are forms of God's judgment, sent to teach us to look at ourselves and what is happening in society. They picture a terrible inward corruption, creating mental torment and ugly moods which result in the destruction of life. That is certainly the picture here.

Then the next plague is described:

The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea died. {Rev 16:3 NIV}

The sea, we have seen before, represents Gentile nations, especially those around the Mediterranean Sea within the old Roman Empire. The sea literally becomes blood red. We have already seen foreshadows of this in the phenomenon scientists call the "red tide," which occasionally appears in the Caribbean and other seas protected by land masses. A microorganism increases suddenly and turns the waters blood red, and all life that is in the area dies. It is what is described here.

It may not occur in all the oceans of the earth. I think that would make life impossible on the globe. Probably this is referring to the Mediterranean Sea. But if an oil spill like that in Alaska creates such terrible havoc, what will it be like when the whole of the Mediterranean falls victim to this red tide?

Then the third angel acts:

The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood. Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say:

**"You are just in these judgments,
you who are and who were, the Holy One,
because you have so judged;
for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets,
and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve."**

And I heard the altar respond:

"Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments." {Rev 16:4-7 NIV}

This judgment falls on the rivers and the springs as we saw under the trumpets. Rivers are polluted by the same apparent phenomenon of the red tide which makes them impossible to drink from. This, too, is, literally,

probably within the limits of the Roman world. Symbolically, it speaks of the pollution of the fountains of wisdom and refreshment in society, i.e., the leaders of thought, the politicians, the philosophers, the scientists, the mind -- benders of the age. They are the ones to whom people look for refreshment of ideas and leadership in philosophy. Their minds become possessed by wrong ideas and lying philosophies -- specifically, the idea that man is his own God and is quite capable of handling everything in his life.

John hears an angel affirm that this judgment is right and just on God's part. It is based on a principle we often hear quoted today, "What goes around, comes around!" What you dish out yourself will come back to you some day. These people had shed the blood of the prophets and of the saints of God, therefore God is justly giving them over to drink blood themselves. It pictures what we often see today. We must suffer from the very things that we run after and want so badly. Even the altar -- a symbol of the place of surrogate sacrifice, someone else dying in our place -- affirms that this is just. The altar symbolizes the theme of redemption. If that substitute sacrifice is rejected and the redemption that it accomplishes is not received, the altar says it is only just that one must suffer the consequences oneself.

The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him. {Rev 16:8-9 NIV}

For a brief time, the sun's heat is suddenly increased. Scientists are familiar with this phenomenon. Every now and then great flares of fire burst from the surface of the sun, causing havoc with the magnetism of the earth, affecting radio waves, etc. We have long known about this. Here apparently is an enormously increased flare from the sun which creates intense heat upon the earth. People are anguished and suffer as a result. And, as the account suggests, they see that it is coming from God. No man controls the sun. No scientist can get anywhere near it or do anything to it. The sun, that flaming star that lights our solar system and warms our bodies, is far too intense for man to tinker with. God does this, and men know it. Yet it leaves men unrepentant. The terrible folly of unbelief, of refusing God's grace, is that you gradually lose the capacity to repent. At last you reach a state of hardness of heart which no longer can respond or does respond to what God is doing. It is too late to pray!

Now the fifth angel is seen:

The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done. {Rev 16:10-11 NIV}

It is stated that this judgment is limited to the "kingdom of the beast," i.e., the revived Roman Empire, or Western Europe. It describes a great area of earth covered with a sudden and unexplainable darkness.

Again, it is not the first time a phenomenon like this has occurred. There have been several times when unexplained darkness has covered a portion of the earth. On May 19, 1780, all the New England states were covered with such a darkness. President Kennedy referred to it in one of his addresses. It is called "the Dark Day," when all of New England was for several hours plunged into a deep darkness. No one has yet explained how it happened. It may be the same phenomenon that occurred at the crucifixion of Jesus when darkness covered the land for three hours. That was not an eclipse of the sun. If your version says so, then it is wrong.

It is an unexplained darkness, symbolizing the removal of moral light -- light from God. All sense of truth and righteousness, or even of God himself, is lost. It foreshadows that terrible "outer darkness" into which Jesus says those who are unrepentant at last will find their destiny.

The sixth angel follows quickly:

The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East. Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the

beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty. {Rev 16:12-14 NIV}

Suddenly there is an interjection. A voice seems to come out of heaven itself. It is the voice of Jesus. He says:

"Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed." {Rev 16:15 NIV}

Then the account returns to the sixth bowl:

Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon. {Rev 16:16 NIV}

You have heard of Armageddon, have you not? This judgment falls on the Euphrates River, which was mentioned also under the trumpet judgment. It dries up the river to prepare the way for the kings of the East, i.e., the armies of Eastern nations such as India, China, Japan, etc.

A phenomenon of our day is the rise to power in recent years of these nations to become great military and economic forces. The rise of Japan from shambles in only 40 some years is one of the most amazing recoveries that history records. Japan has become a world economic power, and China is not far behind.

All this is undoubtedly in preparation for the day of judgment which is to come at the close of this age.

Rudyard Kipling, the English poet, anticipates this in a quotation you have often heard. He is quoted as saying,

East is East and West is West,
And never the twain shall meet.

But that is not the whole quotation. We end it there as though these two will never get together, but the whole quotation reads,

East is East and West is West,
And never the twain shall meet,
'Til earth and sky stand presently
At God's great judgment seat.

So there is coming a time when East and West shall come together: It is at the battle of Armageddon!

We are here given insight into the way nations are manipulated by unseen forces. They are unconscious of the fact but they are being made to do certain things. Here appear three evil spirits, like frogs, which come out of the Satanic trinity -- the great red dragon, the scarlet beast, and the false prophet -- and, by miracles, they deceive the nations. They trick them into launching World War III. It is a terrible time when the nations of the world launch the nuclear rockets they have been holding in reserve until then. This is the time when, as we saw in Chapter 9, armies of 200,000,000 gather into Palestine, to make war, first with one another and then, in a last desperate combat, with the Lamb of God himself!

As we have seen before in these series, there is always a parenthesis between the sixth and seventh of each series. Here that parenthesis is only one verse long, Verse 15. Here Jesus speaks, saying, "Behold, I come like a thief!" That reference to his coming as a thief reminds us of Paul's word to the Thessalonians in chapter 5 of his first letter:

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. {1 Th 5:1-3 NIV}

That seems to refer to the same scene that we have recorded here. The Lord Jesus came for his church at the beginning of this seven-year period, and he and the church remain on earth, invisible, behind the scenes, but suddenly Jesus will appear. The purpose of the Lord's coming, as announced here, is to strip off the garments of hypocrisy by which men have clothed themselves throughout this time.

We have all witnessed the hypocrisy of politicians and other leaders, even Christians, being stripped away. It is always God's work to take away facades, to let people see one as he really is.

So Jesus says, "Blessed is he who keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed." The only garments that can never be taken away are the garments of righteousness which Jesus himself gives. Those in that day who have those garments will be blessed indeed.

So we read in Verse 16, "They [the three frog-like spirits] gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon," that great plain of Esdraelon which stretches from the foot of the mountain of Megiddo in the northern part of Israel.

When Napoleon saw this plain, he said, "Here indeed all the armies of the earth may gather for battle."

Now the seventh angel acts:

The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, "It is done!" Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake [We have seen this twice before: the sounds of Sinai that mark the end of God's judgments]. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake [The Richter scale reading is not given here, but it must be somewhere around 11 or 12 or larger]. The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed [The "great city" is Jerusalem. It is identified for us in chapter 11 as such]. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible. {Rev 16:17-21 NIV}

This terrible scene falls first, we are told, upon the atmosphere, upon the air.

You may recall that in Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul calls Satan "the ruler of the kingdom of the air," {Eph 2:2 NIV}.

This judgment probably describes nuclear warfare which releases enormous clouds of radiation upon the earth so that the air is literally poisoned. We saw something of this in the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in Russia which poisoned the atmosphere in wide areas of the country.

God answers this with the greatest earthquake the world has ever known. Jerusalem is split into three parts by this movement of the earth. You can read a description of it also in Zechariah 14, where the prophet tells us that the Mount of Olives will split in half and part of it move to the north and part to the south, and a great valley will be created in between. From other Scriptures we learn that the topography of the whole land of Israel will be altered. At this time, also, God judges Babylon the Great, the city that represents the false church. We will see that judgment in the next two chapters.

This earthquake is accompanied also by a terrible hail storm with hail stones weighing over one hundred pounds falling from the sky. For years I have been clipping out of the back pages of newspapers accounts of great chunks of ice, weighing as much as 300 pounds at times, that fall on different parts of the earth. Nobody seems able to explain where they come from. Apparently some phenomenon in nature produces great chunks of ice which occasionally fall upon the earth even in our own days.

Here is a terrible hail storm showing the awful cataclysms, the upheavals of nature during this time, a time

when, according to Jesus, "men's hearts will fail them for fear at seeing the things that are coming to pass on the face of the earth." Further description of this can be found also in Ezekiel 39.

Now here is the good news: That is the end!

I want to breathe a sigh of relief at this point, don't you? John is going to pick up one event out of this scene, the destruction of Babylon the Great, and enlarge on it in the next two chapters. But in Chapter 19, Jesus will reveal himself; he will be seen by all the world, appearing in power and great glory, just as the Scriptures long have predicted.

As we close this chapter, we must ask ourselves, "What is God trying to say to us by all this?"

Remember, this book of Revelation was written for the seven churches, which stand for the whole church on earth today. What is this intended to say to us?

It is repeated several times in the chapter: Judgment does not produce repentance. It cannot; it never was intended to. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 2:4, "Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" {cf, Rom 2:4 NIV}. It is not judgment that will change our minds. Men often get more stubborn, more set upon evil, by judgment. But it is grace that changes the heart. Judgment removes and ends evil. Judgment cleanses society. Judgment enables a new beginning to come. But it does not change people's minds. No, for that you have to look to the grace of God, the mercy of God, the blessing of God, even the providence of God.

Some of you have formed the habit of leaving this service and going out to have a nice meal with your friends at some restaurant, or perhaps later this afternoon gathering with your family and doing something enjoyable together. Do you ever stop to think that those moments are only possible by the restraints of God upon the evil of man?

If human evil was allowed for one moment to be loosed among us; if people were allowed to do what they want to do in their hearts toward each other; we would be instantly plunged into terrible anarchy and murderous bloodshed. Nothing of the pleasantness of life would be possible to us.

God has sent anticipations of his judgments to us so we know what such judgments are like. We have seen enough of them to know how bad they will be. But it is God's grace that invites us to receive the Lord Jesus, to come to the One who took our place, who gave himself for us, not only to change us, and make us over anew, but to teach us how to live in the midst of a world gone mad!

That is what grace is for.

How grateful we ought to be for the present restraints of evil that God has ordained in our day!

Title: The Earth's Last Trial
Series: Revelation
Scripture: Rev 15:1 - 16:21
Message No: 19
Catalog No: 4207
Date: March 25, 1990

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