

Seven Bowls

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn to that chapter we read, Revelation chapter 16 and verse 17. The seventh, in page 1246, Revelation 16 and verse 17.

The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple from the throne, saying, It is done.

And we're going through, I believe, that part of this book which is the most difficult to get our heads around. So if there's one message, there's one thing I would say to you at this point is, Please stay with me.

It's very difficult to try and grapple with some of the most difficult and complicated concepts in the Bible. And yet, sometimes when we do so, by God's power and by God's influence upon us, as his word speaks to us, then we can discover things that we never discovered before.

And I hope that that's the case this evening. It's not my intention to go into the minutiae, the little details that are in this chapter, because that would take ages and ages.

[1 : 1 6] We could spend weeks and weeks on this chapter alone, and the commentaries are full of what each of the elements represent. And I don't want to do that this evening.

I simply want to see a few things which I hope we can draw out of this chapter as we let God speak to us through it. There are two similarities which strike you as you go through this chapter.

One is how similar it is to the plagues. These plagues are to the seven trumpets, if you remember, all the way back to chapters 8 and chapters 9.

We don't have time to read, but if you're interested in following up your understanding of this chapter and the book of Revelation, then go back and see how similar this chapter is with chapters 8 and 9, when it describes what happened as the seven trumpets were sounded.

The second similarity is that with the plagues which God sent to Egypt at the time of Pharaoh in Exodus.

[2 : 2 2] That's why I read from chapter 8 the plagues that describe the gnats and the frogs. And of course there were ten of these plagues. They're not identical, but they're such a striking similarity with the two things, both what happens in chapters 8 and 9 with the seven trumpets in Revelation, and what happens way back in Exodus in the ten plagues.

There's such a striking similarity that I don't believe that's an accident. Now, because they are so similar to the trumpets in chapters 8 and 9, I believe that chapter 16 is a description of exactly the same thing as chapters 8 and 9.

Here is God coming to us once, one more time with the same message, and the message is that the world is progressing. The world's not at a standstill, but the world is progressing to a final point in history.

Now, if you ask people in the world who don't follow the Lord and who have no interest to the Lord, they'll say, well, we believe the world is progressing as well. We believe that mankind is acquiring knowledge, and he's developing in his own understanding of where he came from, and his own understanding of the kind of nature and the environment which he belongs to, and also you look at the changes in technology and everything that mankind can do nowadays.

Of course, we're progressing, but we're progressing towards improvement, and in fact, one day perfection. That's what people will have you believe if you ask them.

[3 : 53] But the Bible tells me exactly the opposite to that message. The Bible tells me that whilst there are improvements in this world, and whilst there are vast changes, particularly in that part to which we belong, and nobody would deny that.

Nobody would deny that mankind is such a genius. There's no question about the genius of humankind, and the incredible things that he and she is able to do in the world in which we belong.

Incredible. And yet, that does not mean that the future of this world lies in the hands of humankind. It doesn't. The Bible tells me.

So I'm left with a choice. Who do I believe? Do I believe those who would tell me there is no God, and they tell me, well, humankind is progressing. There'll come a time when we won't age.

There'll come a time when perhaps we won't die. There'll come a time when we'll have the mastery of our own universe and our own destiny. Or do I believe the Bible? Now, that's the challenge of faith.

[4 : 55] That's where each one of us are tonight. Challenged by this one star question. Who do you believe? The Lord who tells us that one day this world will reach the point where it will be destroyed.

It's hard to believe, isn't it? It really is hard to believe. It was hard to believe in the days of Noah. That's why Jesus pressed home this great truth to the people around him who were living in their own complacency, refusing to believe that anything catastrophic was going to ever happen to them.

Jesus said it's the same in the days of Noah. They thought the same. They watched Noah building the ark, and they said, you are a fool. Why build an ark? You're nowhere near the sea. You're nowhere near a lake.

Why in the world are you building such a monstrosity of a thing? There's not a single sign that the world is going to be destroyed. And all the time Noah, on his own, told the people day after day that God was going to judge the world.

Nobody believed him except his own family until the day came. But he chose not to believe the world around him, but he chose to believe the voice of God. And that's where we are this evening.

[6 : 07] That's the challenge of faith. And it's a challenge that arises in so many days. It's a challenge of faith to believe the resurrection. If there's anything impossible in the Bible, it's the resurrection.

The world will tell us that once you're dead, you're dead. And that's it. There's a finality to it. It's impossible for anyone to rise from the dead. I know that. We all know that. And yet God says, I am the resurrection and the life.

He that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. So that's the challenge that confronts us now. Do we believe that God is progressing this world not towards perfection in its present form, but towards destruction of its present form?

That's the message that comes out to us time and time again for the book of Revelation to the point in which a skeptic would say, well, this is tedious. I mean, we've heard it once.

Why say it again and again and again and again and again? Well, that's a good question. It's a very important question. And the reason is because God is patient.

[7 : 14] And he tells us one, he tells us, he puts it in one way, in one chapter. Then he comes to us in another chapter. He puts it in a slightly different way. Then he comes to us in another chapter.

He puts it in a slightly different way. And it's the same message that unless you repent, unless you turn to God, and unless you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you too will perish.

And you too will be condemned on the great day of judgment. And we'll go on to that in a few moments' time. So this book is really a book of judgment, a book of punishment, a good book of wrath. But interspersed in all the chapters, there is this message that God is, after all, God didn't need to tell us any of what he's telling us in the book of Revelation.

Why is it that God is warning us? He's coming to us again and again and again. And he's telling us the same thing. Because the Bible tells us that it's not his wish, that any should perish, not willing that any should perish, says Peter, but that all should repent and come to a knowledge of Jesus.

That's God's desire. And that's the gospel in which God presents to you his way of escape and his way of salvation. Now, I want us to look very briefly then this evening at, in trying to recognize, in recognizing how similar this chapter is with the plagues of Egypt.

[8 : 38] I want us to try and put them together and draw out, rather than going into each verse in detail, I simply want to draw out some principles or some elements of this chapter, which I hope we'll be able to take away with us.

And I hope we'll be able, at the very least, we'll be able to give us food for thought as we consider how God is speaking to us. First of all, there is a delay brought about by God in order to give everyone as much time as is reasonable to turn to him.

That's the first thing that strikes me about this chapter. There is a delay. It perhaps strikes me even more in the chapter before that. We saw that last week. But we saw that if you wanted to give it just a title, probably the most daring title we could ever give, chapter 15, was that heaven is rumbling.

And I don't mean that in any disrespectful or irreverent sense at all. But that heaven itself is making the noise of forthcoming judgment and destruction.

That's what... There's a poignancy in chapter 15. God is getting ready for something. He's preparing for something. And he tells us he's preparing.

[10 : 08] Why does he tell us? Because he is patient. And he has given us a delay in his patience in order for each one to hear the gospel and in order for us to come to faith in Jesus Christ.

I wonder how long that delay will last. I don't know. But I do know this, that for each one of us it will last different times. Because for us, that delay will last as long as we are alive in this world.

Today, the Bible says, is the day of salvation. And faith in Jesus doesn't hesitate. It doesn't draw back and wait. But it comes as we see the reality and the truth of Jesus Christ.

We take that step forward and say, yes, Lord. Yes. I will follow Jesus. I will come with all my weaknesses and sinfulness.

And I will place my trust and my surrender in Jesus Christ. That's what faith is. And I would ask you again this evening, as I've asked you often before, and as you've heard often before, don't delay.

[11 : 22] Don't stretch it out. I don't see any reason why people want to make the most of that delay. In any case, God is patient. And yet, a day will come when that patience will be brought to an end.

This verse tells us it is done. And that means it is finished. God's plan is complete. And no longer is there an opportunity for us to come to faith.

And whilst today, tonight, God comes to us and he offers his salvation to us, then that invitation will come to an end. The second thing I notice in this chapter is this.

That there are two distinct worshipping worlds. Two separate worshipping worlds. Chapter 15 and chapter 16, if we put them together.

There are two distinct worshipping worlds. The same was through in Egypt. Because it came down, the conflict in Egypt came down to one of religion.

[12 : 24] It all depended on whose God you worshipped. Whether it was the calf, the false God of Egypt, or whether it was the living, the true one and only God who had revealed himself to the people of Israel.

That was the choice. That was the challenge of faith. And that was the challenge that ended up most solemnly in the complete destruction of Egypt at that time.

But there were two distinct worshipping worlds. You see that in chapter 15 and verse 3. And we are the saints of God. Those who have believed and trusted in Jesus.

They sing the song of the Lamb. And they sing, Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty. There's the heavenly world. Now the heavenly world exists here on earth while we are alive.

Those of us tonight who come to God in faith and who worship him in faith, we are not perfect. We are sinners. And it's in recognizing our own sinfulness that we come to him.

[13 : 26] But yet, we belong to heaven. That's where our citizenship lies. That's where our passport belongs. In heaven. That's what the Bible tells us. And there is an eternity of difference between those who belong to that world, the heavenly world, and those who belong to this world.

But they are worshipping just the same. Those in chapter 16 who aren't worshipping the Lamb, Jesus, are worshipping the beast.

There is no middle ground. There was no point in anyone, chapter 16, to say, there's nobody in chapter 16 that says, I don't worship anybody. I am my own free agent. You either worshipped the Lamb and followed him or you worshipped the beast.

And we'll go in in a few moments' time to talk more of what the beast represented. The third thing I want us to see in this chapter is this. The balance, there is a fine balance in our health, in our minds, and in nature, which has been established by God and which can easily, in a moment of time, be tipped by God.

Now, you see that, for example, if you read chapter, if you read chapter 16, and the first angel poured out his bowl on the earth and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshipped its image.

[14 : 58] Now, I know that I'm perhaps taking liberties and try, and, and, I'm identifying their suffering with physical suffering, but that's the way it's given to us. Now, later on, in the fifth angel, I know that the, the, the darkness and the, oh yes, it is the fifth angel.

Chapter 10, in verse 10, the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish and cursed the God of heaven for their pains and their sores.

And then, in verse four, the third angel, on verse three and four, the second and the third angel, poured the bowl into the sea. Now, if you read this chapter as a whole, you'll notice that the bowls of the, are called the bowls of God wrath are distributed everywhere.

There isn't a place in the universe where the bowls of God's anger do not reach. But I want us to just to notice this, that there is a balance that has been established in the universe.

And there are three areas given to us here in this chapter where we see that balance. First of all, in our own health. Then, in terms of our own minds. And then, in terms of what we call nature.

[16 : 16] I don't need to tell you tonight how finely balanced our health is. I don't need to tell you much that even in a world full of medical development and technology, it doesn't take much for the whole world to be turned upside down.

We've seen that, for example, with swine flu. Now, swine flu, as it turns out, is not as serious as perhaps might have been suspected at the very beginning. But it strikes, doesn't it strike you as a message, it's a poignant message, isn't it, that humankind with all his technology, with all his know-how, with everything that is at his disposal, all the communications and the transportation and the medicine and everything, has not succeeded in confining swine flu.

So, you imagine, for example, that swine flu, as it could have been, it could have been far worse. It could have been far more deadly than it actually turned out to be. I know that the people have died of it, and I'm not trying to belittle it in any way, but it could have been far, far more deadly.

For example, the flu, the pandemic in round about the 1912, round about the beginning of the 1900s, was it killed millions and millions of people. It was a massively deadly epidemic, pandemic.

But you imagine this one was the same. The whole world would be turned upside down. People would be tonight living in fear because they would know that for sure if they caught swine flu, they would be dead within days.

[17 : 49] And everyone would, nobody would feel safe because, and we would all be reminded of how vulnerable our bodies are. There's a fine balance, isn't there, between health and sickness, and that balance has been set up by God.

And why is it that we're so foolish in not recognizing our own vulnerability? And when we see our own vulnerability, we ought to turn to the Lord. When God brings us every time that we hear of something like swine flu, even something that's not so serious, we ought to be reminded of how unable we are to control our own destiny and how dependent we are upon the living and the true God.

And we ought to be seeking the Lord with our whole heart and ought to be calling to Him and coming to Him in faith. And the same is true for our minds.

Look at the awful situation here in the fifth angel, the throne of the beast. I don't know what this means, I'm not sure, but I'll tell you this, it really is a horrible scene, isn't it, where people's kingdom were plunged into darkness.

I don't believe that that's a physical darkness at all. The Egyptian darkness, again, similar to the Egyptian plagues, but yet this is not a physical darkness.

[19 : 05] Egypt was clouded with darkness that was so thick you couldn't even light a candle. But this is a spiritual darkness, this is a mental inability, an emotional inability to see the light.

And people are going crazy, literally, in this, it appears that people's minds are taken from them to the extent that they're knowing their tongues in anguish. Now, again, I don't know what this means.

I don't know exactly what it means, but is the Lord not telling us at the very least that there is a fine balance in our minds? And some of us know this, the people we know and even ourselves.

And we know it perhaps from our own experience, that there is a fine balance. Once again, reminding us of our own vulnerability and that our lives are not in our own hands, but that they are in God's hands.

And it's the same with nature. The balance of nature is a slender one. That careful balance that was set up in Genesis chapter 1 when God created the heavens and the earth, not just in terms of each living being according to its separate kind, but according to the interrelationship there was between nature and between the animal kingdom and between humans, there is an interrelationship in which we're all dependent upon the same things.

[20 : 29] The air that we breathe, the water that we drink, look at what happens here, the water that was drunk in the earth, it all of a sudden was changed to that life-giving, sustaining substance that we all know that we can't do without and it's changed into a horrible, just like the waters of Egypt were changed from being water into blood so that it became a stinking, horrible mass of death to the Egyptians.

The whole country was plunged into confusion and darkness and despair because God, simply in a moment of time, he issued the word and everything changed in a moment.

Now all of these things are to show us of how utterly dependent we are on God and it strikes me as so incredibly arrogant that you are prepared if you don't love the Lord, if you haven't come to faith in him tonight, that you're prepared to drink his water and yet not listen to him.

You're prepared to breathe his air and yet use the air that we breathe to mock him sometimes, to live in a way that is completely disrespectful of him, to live in a way that almost ignores the fact of his existence and most importantly of all, to refuse to listen to the gospel as he comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ and to refuse.

It strikes me as the most arrogant thing that we can ever do and I believe that at the very least, again, that this chapter reminds us.

[22 : 12] You know, it's a fascinating subject if you go into the times in the Bible where God actually upsets, changes the balance of nature in reverse. We're talking in this chapter of how it reminds us of the change that God can bring about in nature to man's destruction but Jesus showed that he could bring about that change to our good.

For example, when he walked on the water, there had to be some means by which Jesus walked on the water. When he stepped on the water, it was physically impossible for him to do so without sinking as it would be for any one of us and yet God in his sovereignty and in his power, he must have changed the properties of water in some way in order for him to step on that.

Look how he did that. Look at the power and the control for him to do that. In a moment of time, he was able to do it because for him it is easy. There's no problem because he's the God who set up that balance in the first place.

The same when Jesus changed the water into wine, changing the internal chemical properties of the water to make them into wine. No problem. Easy.

Easy for him because he has the world, the universe, in his hand. It's a universe which we belong to. It's a universe which we take for granted. It's a universe which we enjoy.

[23 : 32] We take what we want and yet we reject the creator. We turn our back on the creator and we don't acknowledge him. Romans chapter 1 and verse 18 says that that's where we went wrong in a refusal to acknowledge or to give thanks to the Lord.

Remember that giving thanks is not just saying thank you, not just some kind of polite acknowledgement to God. It's a coming down and bowing, bowing before God and coming in sorrow and in repentance and acknowledging his holiness and his righteousness and our own need to be changed.

That's what God wants us to do tonight. Wants us to come in our emptiness and wants us to accept his own salvation. But the next thing that strikes me about this chapter is this, that the influences in which the world are powerless to stop the ultimate destruction which God can and will bring about.

The beast again reappears in this chapter. The beast is three forms. There's the dragon, there's the beast and there's the false prophet. Remember we saw that in chapters 11 and 12.

The dragon, the woman and the dragon in chapter 12 and then in chapter 13 there was the first beast which represented the powers and influences in this world that used force to get their way.

[25 : 00] They used politics and force to get their way. The world is full of them. And then the second beast arising out which was a much more subtle deceitful influential power. Now there's all three of them in this chapter and they're operating in tandem, hand in hand.

And they exert a massive, a massive amount of power in the world. Now, I don't really want us to think in terms of just the future when it comes to the beast, the dragon, the beast and the false prophet.

Lots of Christians, they try to decipher this chapter in terms of events that will one day or may one day take place and they're watching the news and reading the papers and they're trying to match up the book of Revelation to what they see on the TV and read in the newspapers.

Now, I've been there, I've done all that, I've tried all these things, it doesn't work, it just doesn't work. It's a far more useful exercise to try and to see what Revelation represents.

In other words, the beast is Satan, it's the devil, but he operates in different forms by different influences all over the world.

[26 : 12] He operates by catching people's minds, sometimes by using means which may not be harmful in themselves and yet because people choose to give themselves to these influences, their minds and their hearts are taken away from the truth and they live their lives for all the wrong things.

What do we have at the moment? What's an example of that at the moment? The celebrity culture. Celebrity culture that we have. Now there's nothing wrong with somebody who stands on a stage and sings.

Nothing wrong with that in itself. Nothing wrong with playing an instrument in itself. That's not evil in itself. And yet, is it not true today that the world's gods are the famous people in the world, the celebrities of the world, the people we read about in Hello magazine and in the newspapers and in magazines and we see on the television day in, day out?

What's wrong with that? In themselves in terms of their talents and all the rest of it? Nothing. But yet, you look at the extent to which the whole world has gone after their own god.

You see, you are worshipping something or someone. It's either god, in which case you've given your life to the lord, or else it's someone or something else.

[27 : 33] But what I want you to notice here is this, that no matter how powerful these influences are and how powerful the devil and Satan is in capturing the minds of people and in constructing himself against God, and that's how the chapter ends, of course, in this arrangement which the beast makes in order for the conflict to take place, the final conflict to take place, God will bring about his purposes because he controls all things and nothing is outside of his control.

And every so often, every so often, he gives us a reminder that no matter what influences there are in the world and to what extent masses of people give themselves to those influences and to all the wrong things, God shows us that it will come to nothing.

Look at Michael Jackson. I don't need to tell you tonight, the whole world is mourning the death of Michael Jackson. It's not for me to say how he died.

I don't know how he died. That's not the point I'm trying to make. I remember the 80s and the 90s. He wasn't just a singer. Those of you who remember those days will agree with me.

He was a God. If you have any doubt, all you do is watch the video called Earth Song. It's the most appalling thing. It's the most frightening thing.

[29 : 15] In his heyday, in his prime, I don't know to what extent he was manipulated by others, but he was a kind of messianic figure.

And millions and millions of people saw him in that light. Some kind of God, some kind of divine figure. Indestructible almost.

There was a strange kind of aura about his fame that drew the affection of masses and masses of people. And today, the devastation in which many people, and I'm not saying all death is a sadness.

Every death is a tragedy. But I'm talking about the millions of people whose worlds have actually now collapsed because they were given in their entirety and their hope and their affection and their commitment.

Everything about them was given to this one hope and this one Messiah. And it's gone. Because he was only a man just like any other man with sickness and with a predetermined lifespan.

[30 : 33] The whole world has its gods. You have your gods. It's either the Lord, in which case you love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, or someone else, something else, something else that you're following.

It could be innocuous in itself, could be harmless in itself, and yet the fact that you've given yourself means that the beast has taken over. The beast has you under his control.

You bear the mark of the beast at least until tonight. And tonight, depending on what, how you respond to Jesus Christ, that mark will remain on you or be taken off by the only one who is able to take it off.

The only one who can remove it is Jesus Christ. Isn't that the most solemn thought? The last thing I want us to think about this evening is the incredible stubbornness of mankind.

Verse 9, do you notice? They did not repent and give him the glory. Verse 11, they did not repent of their deeds.

[32 : 04] Verse 21, at the end of the whole process, and great hailstones about 100 pounds each fell from heaven on people, and they cursed God for the plague of the hail because the plague was so severe.

What does that remind you of? It reminds you of Pharaoh, doesn't it? One more time, we're going back to the incredible stubbornness of Pharaoh. When Moses went to Pharaoh, I guess that he thought that this conflict would be an easy one.

Here was this man who represented these downtrodden slaves, the Israelites, and he in all his glory was not going to give in to them. Until, of course, he began to discover how powerful not Moses was, but God was.

His own magician said, this, they said to him, is the hand of God. And that's the moment when Pharaoh should have had a second thought. But instead of thinking again, he made the most catastrophic mistake that he ever made in his life.

Instead of turning to the Lord and admitting, confessing that he was in his hands, instead of listening to the Lord and doing what he said, he decided to dig his heels and to fight against the Lord.

[33 : 28] That was the worst mistake he ever made. And plague after plague after plague. And it's no use, by the way, in saying, ah, yes, but the Bible says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. That's too simplistic.

Pharaoh was entirely, utterly responsible for his own refusal to listen to the Lord. And it was because of Pharaoh's stubbornness that not only he died, but many, many people in his kingdom were destroyed as well.

God's love. And at the end of the day, at the end of Exodus chapter 12, there is misery and destruction and devastation in the land of Egypt. And I believe that what God did, as we tie it in with what we're reading here in Revelation chapter 16, was meant to represent or to foresee God's ultimate judgment on this world.

right now we are living at a time in history where God is holding out his hands to us and where God is inviting each one to come, to come to faith, to come to repentance, to come to see the truth of why we are in this world and what he can do to change our lives from what it is, to give us what he calls everlasting life, life that goes beyond the grave and life in which we discover what we were really created for and in which we discover the real meaning of what it is to be in the image of God and to be and to do everything that God created us to do and to be.

You have that opportunity tonight. That opportunity will not always be there. And if tonight you are like those people in chapter 16, of plague after plague as we see time and time again how clear God's display of his own judgment and his own majesty is, it's the height of foolishness to say no, I will not have this man to rule over me.

[35 : 44] Let's pray. Father in heaven, once again we draw near to your word and we ask that you will bless your word to us and we pray that it will speak loudly and clearly and powerfully to us.

We pray that the Holy Spirit as only he can do will open up our hearts to accept your word, to receive it and to come to that living knowledge to know Jesus Christ as our own saviour and to follow him.

Lord God, we pray that you will work amongst us this evening and forgive our sins in Jesus' name. Amen.