

**Series:** 7 Bowls with 7 Plagues (a study in Revelation 15-16)

**Sermon Text:** 15:5-8 Intro to the Plagues

(Use **app** to get

lesson/slides, ask questions)

Let's first set the scene: **Chapter 15** is an extended intro to the *last* of 3 judgment-redemption cycles described in **chapter 16**. The strange thing is how John shaped this ominous chapter like a celebration sandwich: The phrase “*then I saw*” in **verse 1** intros the subject, the phrase “*and I saw*” in **verse 2** slides in a worship scene, then the phrase “*after this I looked*” in **verse 5** gets back on point. Scholars say that this suggests “*The saints’ suffering provides the reason for, and their celebration offers the response to, the coming judgments*” (Duvall, 208). Last time, we unpacked the secret seashore song in **verses 1-4** where the saints sang of **Jesus being God’s Deliverer and Judge who is making the world right**. We discussed John’s aim to comfort oppressed 1<sup>st</sup> century believers (and future ones too!) with Exodus images. Today, we’ll further explore the symbols he used and consider this challenging...

**BIG IDEA: Instead of arguing about God’s wrath, we should help people avoid it!**

This chapter began with John *seeing seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished*. If you’re unaware, *the wrath of God* is often argued about. You can [click the link in our notes](#) for the details, but today, our focus will be on taking action rather than arguing. We’ll begin by reading what John saw in **verse 5**: *After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened*. Those who’ve read Exodus recognize this *tent of witness* from Israel’s wilderness journey after their Egyptian enslavement. God gave Moses the blueprints to build [a portable temple-tent](#) as a visual space to remind people of His presence and to participate in worshipful activities. It conveyed His yearning to dwell with people and empower us to be priests (caretakers) of earth which God deemed part of His temple in Isaiah 66:1, “*Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool*.” On the one hand, God is everywhere present and can’t be confined. On the other, the Garden of Eden, the tabernacle-tent, and Jerusalem’s temple were physical spaces where He gladly met with folks in tangible ways. That’s

logical because He created us to learn/relate through sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch.

Faith is often viewed as an immaterial or internal concept, but “Can you think of ways that Scripture urges us to experience and express faith physically?” I mean, John 1:14 says God, who is a spirit, took on physicality to tabernacle (dwell) with us. He famously turned human senses into sacred spaces where heaven overlapped earth by giving sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and speech to the mute. Faith caused Jesus to physically suffer, and He used spaces such as the Garden of Gethsemane and the cross to do spiritual battle. Moreover, His resurrection proved God’s desire to redeem our material parts, not just our souls, and Revelation 21 reveals God’s end game: “*I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God...And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.’*” Seems to me that God is quite interested in the physical realm!

***The tent of witness*** in **verse 5** is one of many earthly spaces God set up to reflect heavenly realities. It points forward to **heaven** and back to the innermost part of the **temple-tent** known as the **sanctuary** or Holy of Holies where God’s presence descended to meet the high priest by the ark of the **testimony**. The term **witness** points back to box’s contents--10 commandments on 2 stone tablets which are God’s sworn self-**testimony** about how we can relate with Him. In Exodus 25:21-22 God said: “*You shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony.*” Notice what else John reported seeing in **verses 6-8**: ***And out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever, and the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.*** This calls us back to **Revelation 8:3-5** where “*Another angel came*

*and stood at the altar with a golden censer (bowl), and he was 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 from the hand of the angel. 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.”*

In both texts, **angels** performed priestly (intercessory) duties with **golden bowls like the Levites did** in Israel’s **temple-tent**. As we learned in **8:1-5**, the work of these **angels** avenged the martyrs who cried out 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?*” Their sincere joy over justice achieved sparked the celebratory song of Moses and the Lamb in **15:2-4**. This brings us to a fantastic follow-up question that someone put in our app: “*Would you agree that God's justice is a reason for worship, but the judgments are not joyful acts to be worshiped?*”. While the answer is complex, Philippians 4:4 suggests every attribute of God is a cause for joy when it say to “*Rejoice in the Lord always.*” Texts like Ezekiel 33:11 also say God “*takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.*” So, like God, death and punishment should not please us, but profound joy can be had when the only righteous Judge executes verdicts that end strife, destruction, violence, and perversions of justice. This righteous desire was expressed by a prophet in Habakkuk 1 who asked God: “*Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So, the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted.*” Anyway, if you’d like to dive deeper into this complex topic, there’s a [clickable link in our notes](#) and a practical example from NT Wright in our quotes section.

For now, notice the intriguing **smoke** in **verse 8** that prevented people from **entering the sanctuary**. **Smokey** and stormy visuals are callbacks to the Exodus where, from a dark cloud over Mt. Sinai, God spoke a self-**testimony** and recommissioned people to do sacrificial, priestly work in this earthly temple (cf. Romans 12:12). While this was going on, nobody could approach Sinai. **Smokey** and

stormy visuals also recall when God's glory *smoked* up the *temple-tent* which forced priests to pause their work and stand in awe (cf. Exodus 40:35; 1 Kings 8:10-12; 2 Chronicles 7:2). Again, *verse 8* says *no one could enter the sanctuary until the 7 plagues finished*, which implies nobody could intercede between God and people. *Verse 1* states these *plagues* are *the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished*. So, unlike the prior seal and trumpet visions in Revelation, these *plagues* represent the final judgment where the opportunity for repentance is no longer extended. Since those details are in *chapter 16*, I'll move to explain how the fantastic follow-up question helped me to see today's BIG IDEA: **Instead of arguing about God's wrath, we should help people avoid it!** We'll unpack that with 2 quick questions...

Question 1: "[\*What are priests supposed to do?\*](#)" Mainly, they are go-betweens who represent people before God by conveying His will and blessings which were written down for Moses and stored in the *sanctuary of witness*. After Israel's colossal failure to honor the first set of tablets, God mercifully and patiently renewed the covenant by giving this sworn self-*testimony* in Exodus 34:6-7, "*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.*" So, these *7 last plagues* after the 2 previous judgment-redemption cycles in Revelation *testify (witness)* to how God's character never changes (i.e., His actions during the Exodus were a foretaste of the future, so like the Egyptians, the world must repent before it's too late!).

Question 2: "[\*How can our priestly work today help people avoid these plagues of wrath?\*](#)" This is what I meant by us taking action rather than arguing about this topic. Just as God commissioned Moses and Aaron at Mt. Sinai to be merciful and patient *witnesses* in an evil empire, Christ followers bring more of heaven to earth by acting as priests even if we become unpopular or get martyred and need to be avenged as God promised to do in Revelation 8. Of course, how we act must be consistent with God's character. For instance, Micah 6:8 says: "*the LORD requires you to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God*", and James

1:26-27 says: “*If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*” My point is that before God unleashes **plague**-pouring **angels** from the **sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven**, you and I have the privilege, power, opportunity, and obligation to model justice and invite EVERYONE (without exception) to repent and join God’s family.

All this brings us to the Lord’s Supper. Earlier, we addressed how God uses our senses to make faith tangible, rather than merely internal and immaterial. This earthly meal is another of many earthly spaces set up by God to reflect heavenly realities and remind us of our commission to be priests who mercifully and patiently intercede on behalf of people like Jesus did for us. We follow in His footsteps by becoming holy and acceptable living sacrifices, which Scripture says is our spiritual worship. Isn’t that interesting? Once again, we’re urged to experience and express faith physically--to not be conformed to this world, but to be transformed with renewed minds that test and discern God’s will. That’s why we come to the table with our offerings--not so we pay to play, but to symbolize our willingness to sacrifice. Ultimately, the **smokey**, stormy **sanctuary** in **Revelation 15** reminds us of the cross where Jesus crucified sin and death, **opened the temple sanctuary** for all types of people, and commissioned His followers to proclaim the eternal gospel to those who dwell on earth, to every nation, tribe, language, and people (cf. 14:6-7). If you believe this gospel, then let’s meet at the table for an earthly meal that points to a heavenly reality and renew our commission to help people avoid God’s wrath and celebrate all Christ achieved!

### **Alternative takeaways to discuss with your people:**

1. Do things like tone and posture matter when we bring up God’s inevitable judgments? What can we learn from Moses about our approach with stubborn people, when might our methods need to become firmer, and what does following the slain Lamb imply about our methods? Check out [these Proverbs related to our speech](#).
2. Professor Greg Beale (p. 325) points out that “*These verses reveal the connection between the ‘golden bowls of incense’ (5:8; cf. 8:3–5), representing the prayers of the saints (verbalized in 6:10 as a cry for God’s*

*justice), and the ‘golden bowls full of the wrath of God,’ representing God’s answer to those prayers. The smoke of the incense (8:4) going up before God is met, as it were, by the smoke of God’s glory (15:8) coming down from His presence. So much happens between the offering up of the prayers and the answer—much suffering, much persecution, much apparent delay in respite and relief. Yet the certain fact presented here is that God will answer.”* Share an instance where it took a while for God to answer your prayer or perhaps a prayer that you still believe He will answer and why. How do Revelation 8 and 15 increase your confidence in God to answer prayers and avenge you when faith brings suffering. How vital is it to ask God for His perspective and patience? When has it been challenging to obey Luke 18:1 where Jesus said we ought to pray and not to lose heart?

### **Quotes related to this passage:**

- **Summary:** “So powerful was Israel’s experience of redemption through the exodus that it became the primary pattern for how God would offer final and ultimate salvation. Jesus becomes the Passover Lamb of God (5:9–10) as his cross/resurrection parallels the exodus event itself. Just as God poured out plagues of judgment on Pharaoh and his army, so he is faithful to judge the enemies of his people and vindicate their suffering. His liberated followers, now united by the Holy Spirit, are being formed into a kingdom of priests dedicated to serving God (1:6; 5:10; Exod. 19:5–6). While they are protected spiritually in the wilderness, their journey is not without trials and tribulations (12:6–17). They anticipate their arrival in the new heaven and new earth, where God will dwell among them (21:1–7). Having been safely delivered to this new promised land, they will sing a new song celebrating God’s faithfulness, covenant love, and sovereign majesty.” (Duvall, 211)
- **The Bowls:** “The word used for the ‘bowls’ of divine anger (phiale, 15:7; 16:1–17:1; 21:9) is also used for the bowls that contained the prayers of the saints (5:8), suggesting a connection between the saints’ intercession and their vindication through the world’s judgments, as with the trumpet plagues (8:3–5). Probably these bowls, like those in 5:8, contain incense representing the prayers of the saints; it is also possible that the image here implies cups of judgment leading up to the final judgment of the wine cup of God’s anger (14:10, 19–20). That the judgments in this passage issue from God’s presence and follow worship by the conquering martyrs (15:2–4) probably implies that God has chosen to release his acts in history in response to the worship of faithful saints.” (Keener, 384)
- **The angels:** “The shining linen and golden sashes worn by the angels reflect their priestly (Lev. 16:4, 23) and royal (Rev. 1:13) roles as representatives of Christ in carrying out these judgments (cf. Ezek. 9:2; Dan. 10:5; 12:6–7)...The living creatures are an exalted order of angels who surround God’s throne (4:6; 5:6, 8, 11; 7:11; 14:3), lead in heavenly worship (4:8–9; 5:8, 14; 7:11; 14:3; 19:4), and play a role in executing judgment (6:1–7; 15:7). The ‘bowls’ (phialē) are probably the broad shallow vessels used to carry offerings and libations (e.g., Exod. 25:29; 27:3). They appear twelve times in the New

Testament, all in Revelation (5:8; 15:7; 16:1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 17; 17:1; 21:9). The bowls are said to be ‘golden’ only in 5:8, where they carry the prayers of the saints, and here in 15:7, suggesting a strong connection between God’s justice and the prayers of his people (also 8:3–5). As the bowls are filled with God’s wrath (cf. 6:15–17; 11:18; 14:10; 16:19; 19:15), so the temple is filled with smoke, a cloud, or light as an expression of God’s glory and power (cf. Exod. 24:15–16; 40:34–38; 1 Kings 8:10–12; 2 Chron. 5:13–14; Isa. 6:1–6; Ezek. 44:4; 1 Tim. 6:15–16; 1 John 1:5). Our God is a ‘consuming fire,’ powerful and glorious (Heb. 12:29; see also Exod. 24:17; Deut. 4:24; 9:3; Ps. 97:3; Isa. 33:14), and no one may enter his presence until the task of judgment has been completed. Life cannot go on as normal until evil is driven from God’s creation.” (Duvall, 210–211)

- **Temple smoke:** “As with the Tabernacle in Exodus, as with Isaiah’s vision in the Temple (Isaiah 6), and as with Solomon’s dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8), the presence of God is shrouded in smoke, making it impossible for ordinary comings and goings. This is a solemn moment. The new song is exuberant, and heartfelt. Deliverance has occurred. But now we are homing in on the greatest showdown of them all. We left the dragon and the two monsters behind, two chapters ago. They have drawn many into their destructive ways. It is time, now, for the destroyers to be destroyed. This is the purpose of the seven last plagues, and of the cataclysmic judgments which follow them.” (Wright, 139-140)
- **Smoke stopped ministry:** “That ‘smoke’ filled the heavenly temple (15:8, note contrast with the smoke of the world’s torment in 14:11) alludes to God’s glory filling his house in some Old Testament theophanies (Isa. 6:4; Ezek. 10:3–4). Under these circumstances the priests could not minister in the temple (1 Kings 8:10–12; 2 Chron. 7:2), nor could even Moses enter the tabernacle (Ex. 40:35); the glory exceeded human ability to withstand. God had filled the earthly tabernacle with his glory at its dedication and a time of celebration (Ex. 40; cf. 1 Kings 8); now he fills the temple with glory in response to the worship of his martyred conquerors through history and responds with systematic judgments (probably also poured out throughout history). Judgment, as well as mercy, reveals God’s great glory. (Keener, 387)
- **Glory reversal:** “At 13:6, the beast insulted God’s ‘name and his Sh·khinah (glory), and those living in heaven’ and ‘was allowed to make war on God’s holy people and to defeat them.’ Now the tables are turned, with God’s people victorious, and God’s fury about to be poured out on those who follow the beast.” (Stern, Re 15:7)
- **Why judgment inspires worship:** “Imagine a village in the outlying countryside of Judaea. It’s a long way from the city, and even traders don’t come there that often, far less government officials. A circuit judge comes to the neighbouring small town once every few months if they’re lucky. But that doesn’t mean that nothing needs doing. A builder is cheated by a customer, who refuses to admit his fault. A widow has her small purse stolen, and since she has nobody to plead for her, she can do nothing. A family is evicted from their home by a landlord who thinks he can get more rent from someone else.



And a fraudster with his eye on the main chance has accused a work colleague of cheating him, and though nothing has been done about it the other colleagues seem inclined to believe the charge. And so on. Nobody can do anything about any of these—until the judge comes. When he comes, expectations will be massive. Months of pent-up frustrations will boil over...Now magnify the village concerns up to the global level. The wicked empire, and its local henchmen, have become more and more powerful, taking money, lives and pleasure as and when they please. It's no use appealing to the authorities, because it's the authorities who are doing the wrong. So, the cry goes up to God, as it did to the God of Israel when the Egyptians were making their lives more and more miserable. And God's action on behalf of Israel is therefore a great act of liberating, healing, sigh-of-relief judgment. Things are put right at last." (Wright, 137-138)

### **Considerations for discussion leaders:**

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Single underlined sentences are for discussion, while key points are double underlined.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the "sweet spot", spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

**Other Articles/Songs/Videos:** Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- [5 Strategies for Reading Revelation](#) from the Bible Project (the first 17 minutes is GOLD!)
- [Heaven and Earth Theme](#) from the Bible Project
- [Other super helpful Revelation summaries](#) from the Bible Project
- [How Revelation mimics ancient Olympic games](#) by Marty Solomon

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