

## Revelation 16:1-7 – Choose Today: Life or Death

Moses poured his heart and soul into leading the people of Israel from Egypt to the Land of Promise. Can you imagine how his heart must have ached as he stood before the congregation of Israel for the last time? He had led them this far but he could not go with them across the Jordan. But he could preach to the people he loved, so he did, standing before them in the same sandals he had been wearing for forty years. They sat on the ground and listened while babies cried and children grew restless—He preached the whole book of Deuteronomy. But he knew those who heard him would separate into two groups: those who trust the Lord and those who don't. Near the end of his sermon he puts the choice before the people: **[read Deut 30:15-20]**. Choose this day. Life or death. "Apostasy" means to stop choosing life; to fall away.

In Deuteronomy, if Israel did not obey the voice of God, God promised to remove every blessing in their land: In Deut 28:15-24, God warned the crops would fail, work would fail, because of their evil apostasy (v20). God would send disease, the sun would bake the land, and the water would dry up. The basic idea of these curses was that if people turned away from God then of course God would let them find out what life is like without any of His blessings. John's vision recorded in the book of Revelation borrows many of its themes from Israel's Exodus, journey to the Promised Land, and early history. And that same choice, life or death, is laid before us every time the book of Revelation is read or preached. The purpose is to keep us from falling, from becoming apostate; to keep us every day choosing Jesus, choosing faith in Him, choosing life. Followers of Jesus have had this book for 1900 years, and so many faithful saints have kept repenting, fighting the good fight, through suffering and hardship, keeping their hope in Jesus alive as they believe these words. But most people stopped listening and fell from faith. Like Israel after Moses, that is a choice to live without God's blessings. The 7 bowls (and the first 3 bowls in particular) expose what life is like without God's blessings.

Earlier in these sermons on Revelation I explained that the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet era, the time period that includes all of the seven bowls of wrath we read about in chapter 16, began sometime in the late 1500's—more than 400 years ago.<sup>i</sup> These last 400 years are noteworthy for the way the Gospel finally burst free from its chains and spread around the Earth. But those who refused to listen to God far outnumbered those who did. We are still living in this era of the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet, at the end of the seven bowls which began 400 years ago.

Revelation 16 predicts the final set of divine judgements on the lands of Christian Europe—the stage on which the drama of Revelation takes place, which Revelation calls "the land" or in most translations, "the earth" (it's the same way the book of Deuteronomy uses the word, almost 200 times not for the whole planet, but for that particular "land"). 7 bowls full of the wrath of God are symbolically poured out on the land to show the consequences of choosing death. **[read v1]** These bowls of judgements reveal, in seven stages, the consequences of rejecting the life God offers all people through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. *The first 3 bowls expose apostasy through an outbreak of corruption that ends in wars and bloodshed.*

*The first bowl reveals that people chose death (v2)*

The angel poured his bowl on the earth—the land, the stage of this drama, which as we’ve seen before, included most of what today we call Europe, which in John’s time was much of the Roman Empire. The second thing to notice is who is affected by this plague: only those who worship and belong to the beast. As we learned in chapters 2-3, in the letters to the seven churches, John's readers were under enormous pressure to bow down and worship the Roman Emperors. Many Christians lived in cities where there were local temples containing statues of the Emperor and they were expected to be good Roman citizens and go along with that cult religion, at least in public, even if they didn't really believe it. So when those Christians read this bowl judgement, they would most likely have guessed that the beast is code for the government of Rome, and those who bear his mark and worship his idol are those who betray the Lord Jesus Christ. Like the people of Israel after the death of Moses, most people chose death, did not keep God’s promises close to their hearts, did not listen to His Word, did not keep trusting the Lord. The Old Testament from Judges to Jeremiah reveals all the punishments and warnings God poured out on that land, on those people, but they kept choosing death. And so it is in Revelation, not about Israel after Moses, but the Roman Empire after the Apostles. Tell me, in all that time, has any part of the world had so much opportunity to hear the Gospel, hear God’s voice, and study God’s Word? And have most listened or turned away from God? The history of Christianity is shockingly short of Christians.

Still, many people believed in Jesus, held on to His Gospel, and in John’s vision they are those who “follow the Lamb.” They choose life not death. Instead of having the “mark of the beast” like those in verse 2, these are the followers of the Lamb, the people symbolically pictured as the 144,000 in chapter 14, “who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads” (14:1). And again using the language from Israel’s history, the people God punishes in the first bowl are people who thought they had the truth on their side, had become the oppressors and persecutors of the true followers of Jesus. So, like God sent Moses to punish Egypt with 10 plagues, John’s vision uses one of those plagues as the symbol for the first bowl of God’s wrath. Verse 2 says those who follow the beast break out in terrible boils or sores.

Skin boils are gross. First the infection causes swelling and becomes sensitive. Then lump turns white as pus builds up underneath the skin. Then it pops. I had an example on my nose last week that would have made a great object lesson. But before the boil becomes an open sore, it starts with infection. This plague of skin sores was the 6th Egyptian plague. [**Read** Ex 9:8-12] Did Pharaoh listen? No, and verse 9 concludes neither do these followers of the beast in the era of the first bowl. The skin sores and boils, however, are a symbol, just like how Isaiah later on used it as a metaphor showing that the people who claimed to serve God were spiritually rotten to the core, and the boils are the outward sinful behaviours that show what comes from choosing death instead of life: [**read** Isa 1:4-6]. It’s like Jesus said in Mark 7:20-23, "And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a

person." The plague of the first bowl means that God began to expose the lie behind the religion of those who worship the beast by letting the corruption inside their hearts become obvious and visible in their behaviours and actions.<sup>ii</sup> An outbreak of evil and apostasy because that's what was in their hearts all along—no matter how impressive their religious robes, cathedrals, and stained glass.

Yesterday in our weekly Theology for Breakfast group we were studying what the Bible teaches about human sin. Everybody born from Adam's human family is born with hearts that are inclined against God toward doubting God, toward looking for happiness apart from God, toward putting confidence in other things besides God. Followers of Jesus receive forgiveness for our sin, but we aren't yet free from the sinful inclination of our human hearts. It's not natural to trust Jesus, to choose life, to obey God. But the Holy Spirit helps us and teaches us, and it's a miracle of God's grace that He restrains us and holds us back from acting as sinfully as our hearts otherwise would. Learning about these bowls helps us take our sin seriously. It's one way God restrains us, teaches us to repent. The first bowl exposes an *unrestrained* apostate people.

*The second bowl reveals that death leads to more death (v3)*

Unlike the first bowl, this one is not exactly like one of the plagues of Egypt. The next one is, but this one is different. The sea is turned to blood. Not just the lands of Europe, but the nations beyond are visited with unprecedented bloodshed and war. The progression of the symbolic bowls of wrath suggests that the sin infecting the hearts of the followers of the beast does not end when it bursts out in the form of outward evil and sin, but spreads and pollutes the sea with death. In the Bible, the sea is a symbol for "the nations." So this 2nd bowl predicts international slaughter. The symbol here of the blood-filled sea is new, but the idea is not. Rev 14:8 says "all nations drink the wine of the passion of [Babylon's] sexual immorality"—in chapter 17 we discover Babylon is the church of those who follow the beast. After drinking the wine of her passion, chapter 14:10 says the followers of the beast will "drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger;" and 14:19 predicts they will be like grapes God throws into the winepress of His wrath, [read Rev 14:20]. The bloodshed is unmistakable, what about the seas? In the Old Testament, Isaiah used the sea as a symbol for "the nations." "*Ah, the thunder of many peoples; they thunder like the thundering of the sea! Ah, the roar of nations; they roar like the roaring of mighty waters! The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them...*" (Isa 17:12-13) Finally, in the chapter after ours, God shows that the sea and "waters" stand for nations [read Rev 17:15]. So we can understand this second bowl plague of the seas turned to blood means God ordained that the apostasy of those who worship the beast was first exposed by the corruption in their own lands, and then somehow lead to terrible bloodshed and war on an international scale beyond the lands of the beast. Centuries of choosing death instead of life brought down God's fair punishment: a land filled with corruption, spreading death to many nations. What started in Europe didn't stay in Europe.

Sometimes we forget history and think western civilization has been mainly “Christian.” But the history of western civilization, at least during the era of the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet, since the 1500’s, has not been a story of love and peace and blessing. Those countries that for centuries claimed to be Christian gave the world the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and two World Wars, all of this bloody harvest started in those so-called Christian lands where instead of choosing the Gospel, choosing life, generations of people went churches that followed the beast. In this way, European history reads a lot like the history of Israel in the Old Testament. Like ancient Israel, verse 9 says even after all this bloodshed, “they did not repent and give God glory.”

*The third bowl reveals those who claimed the power to save are to blame (v4)*

The symbolic plague comes from Exodus 7:14-22. [read] One of those graphic details is when God says the river, "Nile will stink" (Ex 7:18). When it turned to blood it rotted and began to stink with the stench of death. When I was 18 I was a missionary assigned to earthquake relief when thousands of people were killed. I smelled that smell. The smell of death. So the people of Egypt could not drink from the only source of fresh water. We need fresh water to live, but this water was dead. That was the first Egyptian plague, all the fresh water was turned to blood. But the main idea is still like Deuteronomy: God taking away the life-giving water from the land. In Rev 16, that's bowl #3 in verse 4, poured on the springs and rivers. Which spread their death, as rivers do, into the sea. The death started in the sin-infected hearts of the followers of the beast, broke out in sinful behaviours that revealed their corruption, and polluted the nations with the bloodiest wars in history. This bowl shows how the infection spread to the seas: via the rivers and springs that were supposed to give life. Sort of like exposing a doctor for murdering the patients he was supposed to save. The significance of this third bowl judgement is that it reveals the malpractice of the a so-called Christian religion that was apostate, fallen—that chose death instead of trusting Jesus. Sort of like how God sent Moses to urgently preach and plead to people who were going on without him, Jesus sent John to write Revelation and offer the choice: life or death. They kept choosing death and spread it to those they deceived.

So what do the symbols of rivers and springs mean? In Rev 7:17, Jesus, the Lamb, guides His followers “to springs of living water”—or “waters of life.” The gift there is eternal life, pictured as springs of water. We saw also in Rev 14, the cry of an angel “with an eternal Gospel to proclaim” saying, [read Rev 14:7b]. Those “springs of water” again describe the offer of eternal life. The heart-breaking contrast is that the nations refuse to drink God’s water and instead get drunk with Babylon, [read Rev 14:8]. The true Church is sent to all the nations to preach the Good News of eternal life through Jesus—like streams and rivers of life-giving water. That’s what Jesus taught: This is the powerful work of the Holy Spirit who saves those who believe in Jesus and sends them to save others: *"On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" (Joh 7:37-38 ESV)* But in Revelation 16:4, people who should have been conduits of the Gospel became channels of curse—these rivers run red with blood, not with the waters of life. This Church claims the name of Christ but is not preaching Christ; these people are not the followers of the Lamb.

The third bowl judgement, however, reveals an apostate, false church, that instead of delivering life-giving water to the nations, brought death instead. So God ordained that apostasy produces an outbreak of corruption leading to international slaughter. Pick almost any history book and study the immorality, scandal, corruption, greed and sexual immorality that characterized the Popes and priests of Rome; see how such abuses of power sowed the seeds of violent revolution in France; how that revolution and the wars it launched laid the kindling that burst into flame in two World Wars. Imagine how different it all would have been if Rome had faithfully preached the Gospel all that time! If they had taught genuine repentance from sin and faith in the power of Jesus to save and forgive sinners; if they had taught their followers to be holy as God is holy, love God above all and love their neighbours as themselves. And not just *taught it*, but LIVED IT. God gave them that choice but they chose death instead. And for centuries the institution that claimed to be the church of Christ persecuted and made war on those who chose life, who followed the Lamb. These are the facts. These are the crimes and this is the evidence. What is the verdict? [read vv5-7] See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil. Do not harden your hearts like verse 9. Humble yourself before God, ask for the forgiveness and grace He offers to all who put their faith in the Lamb who died for our sins, Jesus Christ the Righteous. Let us also do more than just talk: won't you pray with me that God would empower us to live it? To be channels of blessing and of living water to our city? Then join us, follow Him, the Lamb wherever He leads us. And He will one day very soon lead us into the eternal Promised Land.

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<sup>i</sup> The 6<sup>th</sup> trumpet predicted the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and the prophecy in chapter 11, of the persecution of the Christian Church up until the time of the Protestant Reformation, concludes with the sounding of the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet right after the Popes lost control of the Netherlands and England. This means the era of the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet, and the 7 bowls within that era, began in the mid-to-late 1500's and continue, as far as I can see, presently in 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> Also see Psalm 38:3-11 where David uses the same image poetically to describe the outward and visible results of his sins—it led to terrible circumstances in David's family life and throughout the Kingdom. Those terrible circumstances which were the end results of David's sin-filled heart are the "sores" and "plague" David speaks of.