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REVELATION 15

GOD PREPARES US FOR THE COMPLETION OF HIS WRATH

When we looked at John's vision in the last part of Rev. 14, we concluded that, when the harvest is ripe, God will wrap up the history of our world. We may think that everything will always continue to go on as it always has. And many people like to believe this. But the Bible tells us differently.

At the end of Rev. 14 we saw what happens when the grain-harvest of God's salvation is ripe, and what happens when the grape-harvest of God's wrath is ripe. Things are coming to a head. That is unavoidable. The question that still remains is how this is going to develop.

Here we are leaving the lengthy detour of Rev. 12, 13 and 14, and return to the main story-line of John's book. After the seventh trumpet (11:15) the storyline suddenly stopped with v.19. But we pick it up again in chapter 15:5.

And now we notice that the seventh trumpet ushers in the final series of seven: the seven bowls with the seven last plagues. This drama unfolds in Rev. 15 and 16, with the outpouring of the last bowl, number seven, unleashing the Final Judgment. This Judgment is then shown in more detail in Rev. 17 and 18.

It is going to be such a horrendous and frightening experience that God does not want us to be un-prepared for this. Therefore, when John tells us in Rev. 15 what he sees, it is only the beginning, the preliminaries, so that you and I may be prepared for what is coming. This passage gives us the heads-up, so to speak.

A BRIEF SUMMARY

When the apostle John begins to describe for us the one vision that unfolds in Rev. 15 and 16, he sees what he calls *another great and amazing sign*. He has used this expression before. That was in Rev. 12: 1, 2. This verbal threat connects the “seven angels with the seven last plagues” (which he sees here) with the pregnant woman and the fiery red dragon, which he saw in Rev. 12.

These signs are so ‘great’, because together they point at the decisive role of the coming of Jesus Christ in this world, his first coming, when he became man, and then his second coming as the eternal Judge.

And as we move through the Book of Revelation, the visions pictured before us focus more and more on this end, the final and climactic judgments that come with the second coming of Jesus Christ. And we all need to see what is really going on in this world to be encouraged and prepared.

That is why John stresses again that he saw this ‘great and amazing sign’ *in heaven*. You will remember that heaven is where he was taken up when it all began in Rev. 4:1. That is where he was taken up to see for himself, and to show us, the view from heaven, the view from above.

John tells us that now he sees *seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them God’s wrath is finished*. That is how he summarizes it.

Later on, we will hear more details about this. In v.6 he describes how he sees them coming out of the heavenly temple. And the actual seven plagues are to be released in Rev. 16. Then we will learn that these angels were instructed to lash out against this wicked and unrepentant world, and hit it hard, really hard, with those seven plagues. It will not be pretty when the holy God comes to punish this world.

But we are not there yet. In v.1, John begins by providing a brief summary of what is going to happen. We could see it more as a ‘title’, a ‘heading’ or a ‘superscription’ above the whole vision he describes for us in Rev. 15 & 16. “This is what this whole new vision is all about,” says the apostle. “Seven angels will let loose seven plagues to finish off the wrath of God.” You better be prepared for this. We are heading for the Final Judgment. It is inevitable.

The horrors pictured in Rev. 16 (and also 17 & 18) are many. We can easily become overwhelmed and discouraged, or even desperate, when you find yourself in the midst of all the terror and misery, all the ugliness and pain, all the horrible disasters in this broken world. What are we heading for?

But then the apostle John calls us to see what he saw. Have a look from here, he says, from above, from heaven, and recognize the burning wrath of God Almighty. But you will also learn that with these last plagues, God’s wrath will be completed. Jesus returns and when the Final Judgment comes it will all be over!

The word ‘plagues’ we remember. It alludes to the ‘plagues’ with which the Lord ravaged Egypt, before Israel’s exodus (Exodus ch. 7–12). He pummeled the Egyptians left, right and centre, till they no longer knew where to hide. And the whole ordeal ended with Pharaoh’s crushing defeat, when he and his army drowned in the Red Sea (Exodus 14). Through all this, the Lord set his people free and onto the road to the Promised Land.

Well, the same thing is happening here. That is what is happening to the church in the history of our world, also today. When God comes with the terrifying horrors of the “seven last plagues”, his purpose is the freedom of his people.

You may wonder in what sense these plagues are “the last”. Some do not believe that there is any linear progress in Revelation. Then “last” means that now for the last time we hear about the same judgments we have heard about earlier in this book, when the seven seals were opened, and when the seven trumpets sounded.

But that does not really work. The storyline of Revelation is complicated and has many sidelines. But there is also progression, development. John’s visions demonstrate that we progress towards the end, and that as we get

closer to the final day, God's judgments become progressively heavier and more intense.

Think, for instance, of the change from afflictions that affect one fourth of the earth (in Rev. 6, at the opening of the seals), via judgments that affect one third (in Rev. 8, at the sounding of the trumpets), to plagues that affect all the earth (in Rev. 16, when the bowls are poured out).

And there is more. After six of the seals have been opened, we see an interruption. After this, the opening of the seventh seal ushers in the angels with the seven trumpets. And after six of the trumpets have sounded, we see another interruption. Then the seventh trumpet-blast (after more interruptions) gives way to the seven bowls with the plagues.

But here is the clincher: Since these are the last seven, there will be no more interruption. God goes straight from the sixth to the seventh plague, which is going to be his Final Judgment that will complete his wrath. And no more interruption also implies no more repentance. Things are really coming to a head.

Now be careful! Here below we cannot connect this linear progression with particular events and times in our history. Where we are in this journey, we do not know, so that we cannot calculate the day of the end. Jesus' own words still stand, that he will come like a thief in the night.

But the journey is real. Revelation tells and shows that we are moving in one direction. And it is all God's plan that he will fulfill and complete for your sake. As the Pharaoh's army was drowned in the Red Sea, so the total defeat of the army of Satan and his henchmen will get you into the new Promised Land.

No, the journey will not get easier when the last things come near. In previous chapters we have already seen visions of terrible judgments that are coming over this world. And the announcement that with the seven last plagues God's wrath will be completed, makes it scarier than ever. What can we still expect?

That is why, in this brief summary of v.1 God himself prepares us. Yes, terrible things will happen but remember that when the world is on fire, when civilizations collapse, when disasters strike, the One who is completing his

wrath is the Holy and Almighty God, your Father in heaven. And he is not just killing good and innocent people, men, women, and children, in random acts of uncontrolled violence.

Some people want you to believe that this is the kind of God we meet in the Bible. In 2008 an atheist US Senator filed a lawsuit against God, “for making terrorist threats of grave harm against innocent people”. He accused God of causing widespread death and destruction of many millions of the earth’s inhabitants, through terrible floods and earthquakes, horrendous hurricanes and tornadoes, pestilential pandemics, while showing neither compassion nor remorse. God as terrorist and mass-murderer.

The suit was dismissed, but one day the blasphemer will meet his Maker, and will be made to acknowledge that God is a God of justice. His judgments are deeply passionate, and at the same time, a properly measured response to those who reject his love in Jesus Christ. Those who persistently refuse to repent and refuse to embrace his love, will find themselves in the hands of an angry God.

A GREAT VICTORY

So, yes, we better brace ourselves for the dark and horrible judgments that are coming. In that light, the first thing that John is seeing when God is preparing him and us for what is going to unfold as these last seven plagues will ravage our world, is actually surprising.

Think of it, what do you expect when you hear about the climax and completion of God’s wrath? Sounds pretty awful.

But listen to what the apostle is telling us. He sees a smooth and sparkling sea. And on the seashore a large and happy crowd, a victorious multitude. And he hears them sing about the royal glory of God Almighty, about the Lord’s majestic power.

No, there is nothing gloomy or scary in this picture in v.2 – 4. Surprisingly, this vision begins by showing the church as it will be after the last day, after the final judgment, after God’s wrath has been completed. In the view from

above we may see already the great victory before all God's terrible judgments have been completed.

This is such a tremendous encouragement in the midst of all the wreckage caused by God's judgments and in the midst of all the violent oppression in this world, a comfort and encouragement that can make you sing, even in dark days. This is how God helps you to be prepared for what is coming.

The apostle sees the splendid shine of the pavement in heaven, before God's throne. It is the same as what he saw before, in Rev. 4. There it says that in the glorious space *before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.*

Here we feel again how John is looking for words to describe adequately what he is seeing. *It appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire.* It is transparent, smooth, sparkling, somewhat mysterious, but also brilliant and beautiful.

The word 'sea' has several allusions. One of them is that it resembles the "sea of cast metal" in the earthly temple. This makes it a symbol of the washing and cleansing power of the blood of Jesus Christ. The mix with fire, adds the symbol of God's holiness as maintained in his judgements over evil. Fire is often an image of judgment.

All these aspects together make this glassy and fiery sea an awesome reflection of God's glory and righteousness, as it comes out in his acts of judgment on the wicked and his acts of grace in Jesus Christ.

In this way this 'sea' is also an allusion to the Red Sea. At that time, the Lord saved his people by having them cross the sea on dry ground, and by drowning the Pharaoh and his army (Exodus 14). The connection with the glassy sea in this passage makes sense. We find here other references to this defining moment in Israel's history.

Just as the Israelites were standing on the seashore, looking at the dead bodies of the Egyptians, and praising God with a song of victory and deliverance (Exodus 15), so John sees beside this magnificent sea, before the throne of God almighty, *those who had conquered the beast and its image, and the number of his name.* We remember this evil duo from Rev. 13.

Who are they, these joyful conquerors? When we look at the location before God's throne, we may conclude that we see the same group that we met in Rev. 7:4–10 and in Rev. 14:1. We see again the 144,000, the great multitude that no one can count. We see the total of God's redeemed children, all God's people saved by grace in Jesus Christ, all the followers of the Lamb of God, who took away their sins.

They have recognized the evil nature of the beast, as Satan's malicious helper, and resisted it. They have refused to worship the image of this awful beast. And they have understood the real meaning of the number 666. They have rejected Satan's evil temptations. They have triumphed over the political and cultural powers that are hostile to God and to his Word.

When we look around, read, and listen to what is going on in the world in which we live today, they look so strong – these powers. But they will not last. Satan will not win. How do we know? Take the view from above and see the great victory.

No, the conquerors John is seeing could not have done this on their own. They were victorious only by the power of God's grace in Jesus Christ. And it was by the power of this same grace that they have been able to endure the troubles and persecutions because of their loyalty to Jesus Christ. That is why they celebrate their victory as his great victory.

This is what John, and this is what we, are seeing and hearing. God has given them harps, and now they make music and sing to the glory of God. They praise the Lord for his awesome power and majesty. They glorify him for his deep love and mercy, but also for his justice in the great victory they are celebrating.

Is it not amazing that this is what we may see and hear in this passage, this great victory? God prepares us. The completion of his wrath is coming. The horror will be beyond description. Are you scared?

But in the midst of these dramatic visions of frightening judgments, God does show us already a glimpse of the future of his people, the future of his church, the future of a great and glorious victory over all his enemies, the future of a singing church.

How comforting and re-assuring is the view of this great victory, when the terrifying judgments are still looming. And this is confirmed when we hear what these conquerors are singing. It says that *they sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb*. This 'lamb' is Jesus Christ, crucified and glorified.

It seems to say that they sing two different songs. But it is actually one song. These singers praise and glorify the Lord God Almighty. He alone is highly exalted because he saves his people by his marvellous and righteous acts. And by his great power he has granted victory to his people – the victory won by the exalted Christ, the Lamb. With this song the church celebrates this great victory over God's enemies.

But it is also called "the song of Moses". The real song of Moses we find in Exodus 15. With this song the Israelites celebrate their freedom and deliverance after Moses has led them out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. They praise the Lord for the plagues that had destroyed Egypt, and for the defeat of the Egyptian army. The great victory of God's grace gave safety and security on the journey to the Promised Land.

Well, this song of Moses is the 'example song', the 'model song', so to speak, for the Song of the Lamb. Just as in Exodus 15 Israel ascribed the victory to God alone, so we hear in the view from above the triumphant church sing about the great victory of God's grace through the saving work of the Lamb Jesus Christ.

In this way God prepares us for the completion of his wrath. Yes, the judgments in the seven last plagues will be horrifying. But the purpose for the destruction of God's enemies is to save those who belong to him by grace alone, just as the destruction of Israel's enemies secured Israel's safety at the Red Sea. Now, that is a great victory to look forward to and to sing about, also today.

So, listen to this song of Moses and of the Lamb over and over again, and be encouraged by its wonderful content. It is a powerful song that praises God Almighty, the glorious King for his mercy and justice, his holy and righteous acts, even when he pours out his wrath in the seven plagues. With deep awe and admiration, it expresses the confidence that, in the end, people from all nations will see the light of God's love and will turn to him to worship him.

What is coming when the seven bowls of God's wrath will be poured out, is outright frightening. But by giving his people the view from above, God prepares us for the final unravelling of the story. He shows us what is beyond the terrors of God's wrath. Have a good look at the great victory and recognize how the completion of God's wrath will usher in your glorious salvation when you follow Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.

In Rev. 16 we will find out how bad it is going to be. And it will be really bad! But God prepares us for the worst, by showing us here the very best that is to come, everlasting praise because of his great and glorious victory.

A SOLEMN ORDINATION

God also prepares us for the completion of his wrath, by showing how he remains in absolute control as he is getting ready for the seven last plagues, including the Final Judgment.

In v.5 the apostle continues: *After this I looked...* The actual chronology is somewhat confusing here. The summarizing introduction in v.1 puts the emphasis on the angels with the last plagues. But then the attention is going elsewhere, when he pictures for us the great victory of the end, in the singing multitude of the redeemed beside the glassy sea. But now he brings us back to the great sign of *the seven angels with the seven last plagues*, to give us more details about this sign.

He describes for us a solemn ordination event in heaven. It is an important moment to watch. It tells us that, whatever is coming, is directly coming from the Holy God himself. The terrifying events in Rev. 16 are his righteous judgments, designed by him, and executed by his specially ordained and instructed servants. He prepares us, so that we will not overlook his fair and faithful care when the going gets tough.

John then sees in heaven *the sanctuary of the tent of witness*, which is also called *the tabernacle of the Testimony*. The words refer back to the Old Testament. First the tabernacle, and later on the temple, signify that the Lord God is present among his people. In the centre of the sanctuary was "the ark of the covenant", with the law of the 10 commandments. This was also called

“The Testimony” (Exodus 25:16, 21). You could call this the “Constitution” of the covenant-relationship between God and his people.

By using these images John’s vision stresses that, what is happening here, happens directly in the presence of the Almighty God himself. It happens where he rules in his splendour and glory, his might and beauty, and where he rules according to his covenant-constitution.

And here is the origin of the seven last plagues. Indeed, also in the terrible things that are happening when the seven bowls of God’s wrath are poured out on the earth, the Lord remains faithful to his covenant-law. His covenant promises include salvation when you turn to him in Jesus and punishment when you refuse his love.

By saying that *the tabernacle or temple was opened*, John picks up the main storyline again where it was in Rev. 11:19. And then something remarkable happens. *Out of the sanctuary came seven angels*. One by one they appear, directly from the presence of the Holy and Almighty God. It must have been an awesome, breathtaking view to behold, as they solemnly line up for the ordination ceremony to follow.

Try to imagine this. Look at them. All of them dressed identically: robes of clean, dazzling white and shining linen and brilliant golden sashes.

The attire of these angels reflects the priestly and royal glory of the exalted Christ. In Rev. 1:13 John saw Jesus Christ also in a long shining robe, and with a golden sash around his chest. In what these angels are going to do, they represent the glorified Christ himself, the eternal Judge.

Then, what happens next is even more impressive. Is it not fantastic that in John’s vision we may again have a close look at what is going on in God’s throne room, just as we saw in Rev. 4 & 5? Do you remember the four living creatures, God’s throne-attendants? Well, one of them hands to each of these seven angels, one by one, *a golden bowl full of the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever*.

Now consider this: in Rev. 5:8 we hear that the four living creatures are holding ‘golden bowls’ full of incense that represents our prayers. Now we read that the golden bowls are filled with God’s wrath. And that the living creatures give them to the seven angels. What a strong re-enforcement of the

message that the Lord uses our prayers, as Christian believers, to set the world straight through his just judgments.

These bowls filled with God's wrath symbolize the fierce, unmitigated, and righteous character of God's holy anger. In Rev. 16 we will face the terrible consequences of this anger, God's wrath for this wicked world.

It is an impressive and solemn ceremony. We have often noticed that Revelation is a noisy book. But you can imagine that this powerful moment, is a silent moment because it re-enforces again that in the progression of God's judgments we are approaching the point-of-no-return.

The apostle John tells us that *the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory and power of God and that no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues were finished*. In the Bible 'smoke' is often a manifestation of God's awesome glory and power. When the Temple was dedicated we read that the priests could not enter to serve, so overwhelming was the presence of God's glory in the cloud of smoke that filled the temple (1 Kings 8:10–11).

Here, in the last verse of this passage, it happens again. And it is actually deeply disturbing. It means that during the seven final judgments God's grace is no longer accessible. The seven last plagues cannot be stopped. Time and again the wicked are being warned to repent as God's judgments affect this world only partially.

But one day this opportunity for repentance will be over. One day it will be too late!

Let God prepare you for what is coming. No matter how bad it gets, nothing will ever spiral out of God's control. When his wrath is completed, there will be wreckage and ruins, everywhere. But that will not be the end.

For then the heavenly temple will open again, and the cloud of smoke will be lifted.

We will see the throne of God and of the Lamb. And we will see his face.

Chapter 23 – Revelation 15

1. In God's judgments, God's wrath, God answers the prayers of the martyrs (Rev. 6:9-11; Rev. 8:1-5) and the saints/believers for vengeance upon his enemies and upon those who persecute the church. How does Rev. 15 assure us that God is fair when he does this?
2. What is the different perspective between the seven seals and the seven trumpets on the one hand, and the seven bowls on the other hand?
3. How can you sing about God's wrath (as in Rev.15)?
4. Many Christians like to have Bible texts on the walls in their homes that speak about God's love and grace. But there is more to say about God. What does the song in Rev. 15:3-4 teach us about God?

Chapter 24 – Revelation 16

1. How do you defend your faith as a Christian, when you hear people say: 'How can you believe in a God who controls everything and who allows all the suffering and misery in the world to go on? For me that's evidence that there is no God!'
2. In what is called "the battle of Armageddon" the Christian church is facing the hostile power of Satan. This can be in the form of violent persecution, but your faith can also be under attack in a much more subtle way. Have you read C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*? What should Christians watch out for?
3. The plagues in Egypt, described in Exodus 7 – 11, are in many ways similar to the plagues we hear about in Revelation. What is the connection?
4. How should we apply/put into practice what the glorified Christ urges Christian believers to do in Rev. 16:15? Look at Matthew 25:1-13; 1 Timothy 4:7b-8; Titus 2:11-13.

Chapter 25 – Revelation 17

1. The name Babel or Babylon we know from Genesis 11 and from Daniel 4. But the name is mentioned more often in the Bible, especially by the prophets. Consult a concordance to find out where.