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REVELATION 16

GOD’S JUDGMENTS ENTER THE FINAL STAGE – ROUND 3

The “Institute for Economics & Peace” is a research organization for global issues. Its research is based on the idea that peace is a pre-requisite for the survival of humanity. Every year this institute publishes a report, called the “Global Peace Index”. Over the last years the conclusion is quite disturbing.

Contrary to human dreams, hopes and expectations, our world is becoming less safe and less peaceful every year. In the last ten years more and more nations are involved in armed conflicts, or outright war or civil war. 500 million people live in warzones. In 2019 the number of refugees in the world was 70.8 million. Terrorism, genocide, hatred, and brutal violence are on the rise, and lead to increasing worldwide instability.

What are we headed for? What does our future look like, if we will not be able to turn this trend around? But then, who says that the future of mankind is in our hands?

John’s visions in Revelation make very clear that it is not.

To be sure, there is, of course, nothing wrong with striving for peace in our human world. Jesus wants us to condemn and resist hatred and violence,

terrorism, racism, and genocide. He calls us to support poor and starving refugees.

At the same time, the Holy God is on his way towards the completion of his wrath against all wickedness, injustice, evil and oppression.

In Rev. 15 we have been given the heads-up for what is coming when the last series of seven judgments will unfold. Seven bowls with the seven last plagues have been handed to seven angels.

The terrifying events we encounter in Rev. 16 are executed by God's ordained servants on his behalf. We come to the point-of-no-return. And with the end around the corner, John sees them coming in rapid pace, one disaster after another.

THE LAST WARNINGS

You may remember from the previous chapter that Revelation 15 and 16 belong together. It is one vision. Rev. 15 is an introduction to prepare us for the horrible things that are coming in 16. We will be facing “the completion of God's wrath” when the seven last plagues, God's final warnings for a wicked and unrepentant world, will be released. After John has witnessed the solemn ceremony when seven angels were given seven bowls, he tells us what happens next.

He hears *a loud voice*, coming from the temple in heaven. In light of what he has just pictured for us in Rev. 15:5–8, this must be the powerful voice of the Almighty God himself. He lets us know that all preparations have been completed. He gives the signal that the moment has come to move from preparation and instruction, to execution of his last punishments, his ultimate and final warnings.

Yes, God himself lets us know, and through the church he lets the whole world know that for him and for everybody on earth the end is rapidly approaching. He commands his execution squad to bring about the dramatic disasters of the seven bowls: *Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.*

The word “pour out” tells us that these bowls are going to be turned upside down, so that all the content goes, entirely! The full and unrestrained wrath of the Holy and Almighty God is being unleashed without holding anything back. This will be more horrifying, terrifying, and frightening than anybody can ever imagine.

Initially, when we saw the opening of the seals, only one-quarter of the earth and mankind was affected by God’s judgments. Later on, when we heard the trumpet blasts, one-third was affected. But now God’s wrath is unrestrained and felt everywhere. When these bowls are poured out total destruction is unleashed on all God’s enemies.

Let us take a closer look. The first bowl is poured out on the land. The effect is incurable suffering in the world. People get malignant tumors, festering open wounds, painful swellings, infectious diseases. The pandemic hits worldwide although it does not affect everybody. God’s wrath specifically targets those who hate him and resist him.

In Rev. 13 we heard about the ‘mark of the beast’. It is a way to identify people who are loyal followers of the beast from the sea, the powerful antichristian sidekick of Satan. Initially this ‘mark-of-the-beast’ seemed to come with the promise of a good, prosperous life. But in the end it turns out that this ‘mark’ singles you out for experiencing the awful agony of God’s wrath.

When the second bowl is emptied, all the water in the sea turns into the blood of a dead person. It is dark and coagulating. It emits the foul smell of death, as all life in seas and oceans is killed. An environmental disaster as never seen before. The world is filled with a disgusting stench, everywhere.

In Revelation “the sea” is usually the symbol of the realm of evil and chaos. The first beast in Rev. 13, with its frightening, devilish power, came out of the sea. Later, in Rev. 19:20, we will hear about the destruction of this beast, but here already God makes clear that this is coming. Evil and chaos will face a horrible end.

But it is not only the water of the sea. When the third angel pours out his bowl, all the fresh water, the drinking water on earth, turns also into blood. Fresh water is one of the most essential conditions on earth to sustain life. When you travel to some countries, they tell you not to drink the tap-water

because it is often contaminated and you'll get sick, but when you boil it first, or you drink only bottled water you'll be fine.

Well, here you can do nothing about it. All the water is so terribly polluted that it is absolutely undrinkable. Try to imagine it. You turn the tap, you shower, you turn on your washing-machine or dishwasher: blood, blood, and more blood. Life becomes impossible. The symbol of life on earth becomes a symbol of death.

Then the rapid succession of bowls being poured out, leading to one world-wide disaster after the other, is briefly interrupted. That is good. It has been pretty overwhelming, and we can easily lose sight of why God is doing these horrible things.

And so, before we move on to the fourth bowl, John tells us what he hears. You may remember that what John hears in his visions usually interprets what he sees. What he hears gives us the view from above.

We meet “the angel in charge of the waters”. That is a significant detail. The point is that it is not just any angel, but this particular angel, who is somehow responsible for water management or for supplying drinking-water on earth. And it is this particular angel who praises the holy God as just, when he makes all water useless.

We first hear this angel re-affirm this. No matter how drastic God's final warnings are, his judgment remains fair, when *those who have shed the blood of God's people, are given blood to drink. It is what they deserve.*

And then we hear “the altar” echo this (v.7). In Rev. 6:9–12 we heard the souls of the martyrs from under the altar crying out to God for justice. Well, the end is around the corner, and here it is. Praise God for being true and just as his judgments avenge the blood of those murdered for their faith in Jesus Christ.

But after this brief intermezzo the pace of God's last warnings picks up again. And it is not getting any better in this world: pandemic diseases, environmental disasters, and now unbearable, extreme global warming. God's wrath coming out of the fourth bowl affects the sun. The fourth trumpet blast darkens the sun. But here it is the opposite. The sun burns with intense,

scorching heat, and nowhere can people find protection. There is no shelter from the blazing fire.

It may look like something from a doomsday-scenario in a thick report about greenhouse gasses and carbon-footprints. But it is the Holy God who directs this. It says that *the sun was allowed to scorch people with fire*. God empowers the sun to sear people with this penetrating heat.

The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. In Revelation the word “throne” refers most of the time to God’s throne. But it is used three times as a parody of God’s throne. We can read about “Satan’s throne” (Rev.2:13), or, as here in v.10, the “throne of the beast” (see also Rev. 13:2). It symbolizes the claim of the beast, and Satan, his boss, to rule the whole world with divine authority.

Indeed, the “throne of the beast”, the centre of the antichristian political and cultural powers in this world, claims the loyalty of every human heart. That leads us to ask an urgent question: Who rules your heart? Who rules my heart? Where is the loyalty of your heart? Who am I committed to? Who are you following? Who is running your life?

Satan claims to be pretty successful! “Let me run your life,” he says, “and you will be able to fulfil your human dreams of a better and more peaceful world”. Can we not give him the benefit of the doubt? Christianity does not seem to do much good anyway, at least, so we are told.

But watch out! God’s judgment is plunging everything into darkness. This refers specifically to the moral and political disappointments and confusion which in the end will characterize the kingdom of the beast, inspired by the devil. The people who believe the promises of the beast, have great dreams and high expectations. They encourage each other: ‘We may be going through tough times and sometimes we will face setbacks. But don’t give up the hope that together we will build a better and safer world. And we can do so without God’. They are convinced that the rule of this beast will usher in a better society, where people will have better lives.

But they are in for a rude awakening; without God, without Jesus Christ, our world will only become darker all the time. Think of the “Global Peace Index” report, mentioned earlier. Our world is filled with painful disillusion

that leave people confused, frustrated, and often scared when they think of the future. What is happening to the human dream? Why does life not turn out as we had hoped for and worked for?

Altogether God's final judgments are turning into serious last warnings that underline the loud call of God's angel in Rev. 14:7: *Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come.*

Are people listening? Do they repent when they realize how dark their lives have become? No, they do not! On the contrary. Look at v.9 and v.11. They refuse to repent and give glory to the Holy God. They continue to blaspheme God as the One who controls all that is happening. They may chew their tongues in pain, but they dig in their heels, bitter and angry, because of their agonizing experiences.

Perhaps you wonder how people can be so stubborn. But really, as a Christian, when you share and defend your faith, you often get asked, "how can you believe in a God who controls everything?" Or people will tell you: "If there is a God who allows all the misery and suffering in this world to go on, I want nothing to do with a God like that. The idea makes me angry."

And John records this because it shows why God's final judgment is inevitable. That is not because the Lord is not gracious. Everyone who repents and turns to him for help and comfort, will experience his grace. But a world that does not seek the cause of its trouble and disasters in its own sin, but blames God, and curses him, because of what is happening, such a world is heading for destruction.

THE LAST BATTLE

When the sixth angel pours out his bowl, we see a different kind of judgment. Initially it does not even look like pouring out wrath on God's enemies!

As a matter of fact, it looks like it will make life much more dangerous for God's people. But, there is more to it.

John tells us that this bowl is poured out *on the great river Euphrates*, with the effect that *its water was dried up*. To understand the symbolism in this vision, it is good to remember a few things from the Old Testament about the Euphrates River.

In the Bible the Euphrates is important as the natural boundary that separates Israel from hostile powers in the east, like Assyria and Babylon. They were troubled by those enemies, but there was no easy access. This wide river was always an obstacle for the kings of those eastern nations.

But now we see, through John's eyes, that God removes this obstacle, the water dries up. This vision tells us that in the final stage, when God is completing his wrath, he allows the evil powers in this world to join forces against God's church. He allows them a final effort to overrun her and crush his people. You may wonder why God is going to do that. But we will see!

The vision suggests that this unified preparation for the last battle of God's enemies is going well. John sees something coming out of the mouths of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. The first two we know. The dragon is Satan (Rev. 12) and the beast is Satan's powerful and loyal helper from the sea (Rev. 13:1). The 'false prophet' may seem new on the scene, but it is actually a new name for the other beast, the one from the earth (Rev. 13:11). He is looking after Satan's deceptive Propaganda Program in this world, his Public Relations Chief.

Well then, what comes out of these three mouths are three identical evil spirits. They look like frogs. Although frogs were unclean animals, they seem harmless. But John gives us the view from above; do not be fooled, these are evil spirits.

So what do we see? We see this huge concentration and accumulation of evil in the world. We see three powerful demonic forces rallying together in a joined effort to develop one satanic strategy. These three demonic spirits are acting as one. They send out one message to what are called here, *the kings of the whole world*. "Come out for the battle," they say. "United we stand."

The result is that all the political, economic, cultural, and spiritual powers in this world that are against the Holy God and his church, against the Lamb Jesus Christ, are going to join forces for the last battle. The war that has been

going on since the fall into sin, deeply intensified since Jesus' death and resurrection, this war is coming to a head.

Together these three evil buddies will give the malicious energy in our world a strong boost. United, they go out to deceive people with miraculous signs. They get them excited for the great and last action against God Almighty and his church. "Let's get rid of the Christian faith and of the Christian believers, once and for all," they say. The non-Christian culture achieves amazing things. Who needs the God of the Christians?

It sounds like a frightening scenario if you belong to God's people. You will run into aggressive enemies everywhere.

John's vision pictures a massive, large-scale military operation. This is symbolic of fierce attacks on our faith that can take many different forms. Sometimes it comes as outright and direct violent persecution. Sometimes it comes as a subtle, almost pleasant, spiritual attack. Whatever works for the devil and his hellish buddies, he can and will make use of it to get you.

But this symbol of a huge political and military power, amassed against the church of Jesus Christ, is meant to drive home how serious this is. Do not underestimate what you are up against when God is ready to complete his wrath.

This is emphasized again in v.16, which pictures the kings of the whole world, gathered for the last battle at a place called *Armageddon*. Now there are many different ideas and interpretations as to what *Armageddon* means or what it stands for.

Let's look at just two examples:

Some see the "battle of Armageddon" as a worldwide war between military superpowers in our world, like, for instance, Europe and the US, versus China and/or Russia. The problem with that interpretation is, of course, that it all depends on the political situation at a given time in history.

Others see the "battle of Armageddon" as a literal battle at the end of times, just before Jesus' return. Then all the nations on earth will march against the earthly city of Jerusalem. Those are the people who carefully follow the

conflicts in the Middle East with the idea that here God is now fulfilling his prophetic visions.

But we need to remember that in John's visions we are given the view from above on what happens here below. And so, we should not look for 'Armageddon' as a location you can find on a map. The name is a symbolic reference to "Megiddo" in the Old Testament. In the time of the Israelite Judges and Kings the plains of 'Megiddo' was the site of a number of decisive battles between Israel and its enemies.

In other words, the name 'Armageddon' calls us to be alert. The last battle of the antichristian world and culture against God and against the church of Jesus Christ will be decisive for your future as God's people.

The question must be asked, should we be scared? The answer is: NO!

In v.15 we hear the voice of the exalted Christ all of a sudden. The interruption is kind of unexpected. It seems almost out of place here. But in the midst of all this frightening sabre-rattling of the evil world-powers, Jesus wants to encourage us. *Behold, I am coming like a thief.* "Do not be afraid or intimidated when all this scary stuff is going on but be ready for me to appear at any time".

And now we understand that emptying the sixth bowl does indeed pour out God's terrible wrath over his enemies. It is true, the powers against God and against the Christian faith seem to become stronger, as they get ready for the last battle. But remember, in v.14 the day of the battle is called "the great day", not "of the dragon or the beast"; No, it is "the great day of God Almighty".

God Almighty, he makes room for his enemies to join forces. He allows them to flex their spiritual muscles. But only with the purpose to destroy them all in one blow. We will hear more about that in Rev. 19:19–20 and 20:9.

However, the call to "be ready for this coming victory" also includes the call to "remain watchful in the spiritual battle that is going on". Spiritual complacency is always a danger for the believers. But the end is rushing in! *Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on,* says Jesus. Be ready to oppose Babylon. Be prepared to resist the deceiving voices of the antichris-

tian culture, to withstand the temptation to compromise between good and evil in your own life.

The final battle will be fought in our lives as an individual spiritual battle.

THE LAST JUDGMENT

Then John immediately sees the seventh angel pouring out his bowl. This is kind of surprising. Between the opening of the sixth and the seventh seal other visions interrupt and slow down the progress. And the same happens between the sixth and the seventh trumpet blast. But not anymore!

When God's wrath enters its final stage, there will be no more interruptions. With the end around the corner the rapid pace of what John sees happening does not slow down. The oath of the angel standing on the sea and the land (Rev. 10:6) will be fulfilled: *There will be no more delay*. When, with emptying the seventh bowl God's wrath is completed (Rev.15:1), the end of the world has come.

The Holy and Almighty God himself, from his throne in the heavenly temple, proclaims loud and clear: *It is done!* His instructions, given in v.1, have been carried out. But it says more. He also announces that, what John was told when it all started in Rev. 4:1, *Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this*, this also has been completed.

It is done. With the seventh bowl, God's grand plan of salvation and of judgment has been accomplished. The history of this world comes to a closure. And that is good. The wicked show no sign of repentance, and for God's children it has been long enough.

Of course, we know that the narrative does not stop with Rev.16. But the visions in the next chapters are basically showing in more detail what John's vision shows very briefly here already in v.19, the destruction of Babylon.

In Rev. 17–20 we will see what this destruction of Babylon means for God's enemies, while in Rev. 21 and 22 we will see what it means for God's church, God's children, for all Christian believers.

John's view from above shows what happens when Judgment Day will be here. The seventh bowl is *poured out into the air*, the atmosphere that surrounds the whole earth. In other words, whatever the effect, it will impact everything in all creation.

To confirm this, God's loud voice triggers enormous cosmic disruptions, powerful signs of his awesome presence. We have already seen and heard the great sound and light show that accompanies God's majestic appearance. But the closer we come to the end, the more overwhelming it gets.

In Rev. 4:5 we read about lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder. These things come back in 8:5, but then an earthquake is added. We see and hear the same again in 11:9, but then it comes also with a great hailstorm. Well, in this picture of the last judgment all this is so hugely intensified that it is without precedent in the history of mankind.

No one has ever felt such a tremendous earthquake, and no one has ever seen such enormous hailstones. Boulders of over forty kilograms come down as ravaging missiles.

Whatever seemed immovable in this world, such as islands and mountains, is uprooted and disappears. The whole creation gets out-of-joint and falls apart when the wrath of the Almighty God explodes.

And what is the result for our human world?

John first sees *the great city split into three parts*. With figurative names like Sodom and Egypt (Rev. 11:8), or Babylon, this 'great city' is a symbol of the antichristian political power in the world, representing Satan's hatred towards God and his people. Well, when the last judgment comes all this impressive power will fall apart, break into pieces, and become utterly powerless.

Following this, the apostle sees *the cities of the nations fall*. Big cities are symbols of human strength, pride, and self-confidence. The first city after the fall into sin was built by Cain, and the first city after the Flood was Babel. Well, when the last judgment comes all human pride and self-confidence will crumble, and the structures of human society will turn into total chaos.

And why is that? Why do these things happen? Because God remembers what was said about Babylon the Great by the angels in Rev. 14. It is time for Babylon to drink the wine of the fury of God's wrath. Even in the midst of these horrible experiences the cursing and blaspheming of God's name goes on and on (v.21). Enough is enough!

Are you looking forward to this? Should we? It does not sound like something you would look forward to, does it?

And yet, in God's message, "destruction" is never the last word.

The completion of God's wrath gives way to the complete liberation of those who cling to his grace in Jesus as the only Saviour.

That is why even a dark chapter like this, ends with strong hope and encouragement.

For by means of his last judgment, your God comes to create his new heaven and his new earth for you, who believe in Jesus Christ.

In God's loud exclamation in v.17, *it is done*, we also hear the echo of Jesus' powerful and victorious word on the cross: *It is finished!* (John 19:30).

This makes the vision of the Last Judgment "true gospel", believe it or not!

It is the good news of Jesus' victory over sin and death.

Through him God's grace and forgiveness overcome the darkness of God's judgments.

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.