

Revelation 15

Notes:

Revelation 15 (NKJV)

¹ Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous: seven angels having the seven last plagues, for in them the wrath of God is complete.

² And I saw *something* like a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who have the victory over the beast, over his image and over his mark *and* over the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, having harps of God.

³ They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying: "Great and marvelous *are* Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true *are* Your ways, O King of the saints!

⁴ Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For *You* alone *are* holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, For Your judgments have been manifested."

⁵ After these things I looked, and behold, the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was opened.

⁶ And out of the temple came the seven angels having the seven plagues, clothed in pure bright linen, and having their chests girded with golden bands.

⁷ Then 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.

⁸ The temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power, and no one was able to enter the temple till the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

Before the seals were opened, we were shown the scene in heaven (chaps. 4–5), and there was a similar vision before the trumpets were sounded (8:1–6). John gazes upon two scenes:

I. The Victors and Their Song (15:1–4)

We have met these saints before; they are the believers of the tribulation period who refused to bow their knees to the Beast and, as a result, lost their lives for the sake of Christ (12:11; 13:7–10). John sees them as victors, standing by the heavenly sea. We think immediately of Israel in Ex. 15, where God had delivered the people victoriously from the bondage of Egypt. Please note that the “sea of glass” now has fire mingled in it; in 4:6, this crystal sea was clear. The fire reminds us that the wrath of God is now about to be revealed (Heb. 12:29).

These saints were slain for their faith, yet John says that they “have the victory” over the Beast! They would not wear his mark or worship his image, and so lost their lives; but in losing their lives for Christ’s sake, they found them again! Even if the Christian dies in his witness, he is the victor, not the loser. Here again we see these saints singing by the heavenly sea; in 20:4, we see their dead bodies raised so that the company might reign with Christ during the Millennium. If we suffer with Christ, we shall reign with Him (2 Tim. 2:12).

In 14:3, the 144,000 sang a new song that nobody else could sing; but here we have the Song of Moses and of the Lamb. The Song of Moses is probably Israel’s song of victory at the Red Sea in Ex. 15, although some students believe that this song echoes Moses’ final words in Deut. 31–32. I prefer the former. Note that the refrain, “The Lord is my strength and song, and He is become my salvation” (Ex. 15:2) is repeated in Ps. 118:14 and Isa. 12:2. In each case, there is a deliverance for Israel. The Jews sang the Song of Moses when they were delivered from Egypt, but they also sang it when they returned to their land after the Captivity, for Ps. 118 was very likely written after the return from Babylon. Isaiah 12 looks forward to the time when Israel will be regathered from the nations of the world and returned to her land; so in each case, the song celebrates Israel’s deliverance from the enemy. In Ex. 15, God’s people stood by an earthly sea; but here it is a heavenly sea. In Exodus, they had been delivered by the blood of the Passover lamb; and here they overcame the Beast “by the blood of the Lamb” (12:11). Note that they sing not only the song of Moses, but also the song of the Lamb. “The Lamb” is the title of Christ most repeated in Revelation; it is used at least twenty-eight times. We have here a wonderful union of OT and NT, of Moses and the Lamb. God’s Law is being vindicated; God’s grace is at work. The Old and New Covenants are being fulfilled as Christ judges the nations and prepares to reign.

Check these references in Psalms and you will see the origin of the song given in vv. 3–4: 90:1–2; 92:5; 145:17; 86:9; 98:2; 111:9. “King of saints” in v. 3 ought to read “King of the ages” or “King of the nations.” To the church, Christ is the Bridegroom, the Head of the body, the Priest-King like Melchizedek.

II. The Vials and Their Significance (15:5–8)

Verse 1 indicates that the angels with the seven vials (bowls) carry the seven last plagues. You will recall that in 10:7, Christ had announced that, with the pouring out of these vials, the “mystery of God” would be completed and there would be no more delay. In these seven last judgments, God will complete His wrath. Satan at this time is pouring out terrible wrath upon believers, the Jews especially (12:12ff); but God will have the last word.

Once again, the temple of heaven is opened; see 11:19. The earthly temple has been taken over by the Beast (13:13ff; 2 Thes. 2:3–4), but the Beast cannot touch the heavenly temple. All he can do is blaspheme it (13:6). The opening of the temple is another reminder that God will

keep His covenant with His people, Israel. Many of the believing Jews have fled to Edom, Moab, and Ammon, where God will protect them. Others will die for their faith, along with many Gentiles.

Seven angels come out of the temple. Seven is the number of completion, and with seven angels delivering these vials of wrath, God's judgments are completed on earth. The angels come out of the holy of holies, where the ark and the tables of the law are kept. The wicked world has defied and disobeyed God's Law, but now judgment is coming. The robes of these angels signify holiness and royalty. The white linen reminds us of the dress of the OT priests; the golden girdle speaks of the king. This is another reminder that the saints of God are "kings and priests" (Rev. 1:6), a royal priesthood. Their dress also takes us back to the description of Christ in 1:13; for He is the High Priest after the order of Melchizedek.

One of the living creatures delivers the bowls of wrath to the angels. All of nature (symbolized by these four creatures) will taste of the wrath of God.

The heavenly temple is now filled with smoke from the glory of God. When the OT tabernacle was dedicated, God's glory filled the tent (Ex. 40:34–35), as it did when the OT temple was dedicated (2 Chron. 7:1–4). During these events no smoke mingled with the glory. Here, however, we have smoke, usually a symbol of judgment (9:2). When the Prophet Isaiah saw the glory of God, the whole house was filled with the smoke (Isa. 6:4). This was because Isaiah's message was one of judgment as well as mercy. John states that nobody in heaven was allowed into the temple until the bowls of wrath had been poured out. No saint or angel could go into the temple to intercede for the nations of the world. The nations were "beyond intercession"; God's long-suffering had come to the end, and His judgment was about to fall.

Students of prophecy are not agreed on the chronological arrangement of the seals, trumpets, and vials. Many students believe that these three sets of judgments follow after each other: the seventh seal leads into the trumpets, and the seventh trumpet leads into the vials, like three parts of a telescope. But if this is so, then the seven trumpets and seven vials are actually contained in the seventh seal. This might suggest that the seven seals are actually opened throughout the entire seven years of tribulation, with the trumpets and vials coming in quick succession at the end. In his excellent commentary on Revelation, William R. Newell contends that the first six seals will be broken during the first three and one-half years, and that the seventh seal (which includes the trumpets and vials) covers the last three and one-half years.¹

15:1 Another sign looks back to 12:1, 3, where the symbolism of the woman and the dragon also appeared **in heaven**. This sign is **great and marvelous**, apparently because it deals with **the seven last plagues** sent by the Lord. The plagues, "the bowls of the wrath of God" (16:1), are much stronger and more widespread than the trumpet judgments in 8:2—11:19. **The wrath of God is complete** with the seven last plagues (see 15:1—19:5). They are immediately followed by the Second Coming and the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:6–21).

15:2 A sea of glass is mentioned in 4:6 as a place of worship before the throne of God. Here it is seen **mingled with fire**, which is often a sign of God's judgment. The fire shows that the wrath of God acting in judgment has reached its zenith. The sea of glass also serves as the Lord's victory stand for all of His overcomers. **Those who have the victory over the beast** are believing martyrs who "did not love their lives to the death" (12:11).

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1997, c1992, S. 372

15:3, 4 The song of Moses is a reference to Ex. 15:1–18, in which Israel celebrated its deliverance from Egyptian bondage, specifically from Pharaoh’s army (see Ex. 14). That song, remembering the great Old Testament redemption, was sung by Jews in their Sabbath gatherings, as well as by early Christians at Easter. **The song of the Lamb** compares the completed redemptive work of Jesus Christ with God’s deliverance in the Exodus. Perhaps the victorious overcomers in v. 2 are “safe on the other side,” and the intensifying judgments of the preceding chapters are comparable to the climactic destruction of Pharaoh’s army when the Red Sea closed in upon them. Considering God’s **great . . . works** and character, every person should **fear** the Lord and **glorify His name** by trusting Jesus Christ. **All nations** is the same phrase found in Matt. 28:19 and Luke 24:47, expressing the scope of the Great Commission, Jesus’ command to proclaim Good News to all nations. **Worship** means “to prostrate oneself,” calling to mind Paul’s description of the time when “every knee should bow” to Jesus Christ, the Lord (Phil. 2:10, 11).²

15:1-2. With the background of the scene in heaven described in chapter 14, John then recorded more details of God’s judgment. He wrote that he **saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign. Seven angels**—each having a plague which all together were described as **the seven last plagues**—were introduced as the final step in the outpouring of **God’s wrath** on the earth. This final “sign” relates to the preceding great signs of the woman in 12:1 and the red dragon in 12:3. These seven angels should not be confused with the two groups of three angels in the preceding chapter (14:6-20) or with any other previous group of angels.

John also **saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire**. This is probably the same sea that was described in 4:6. **Beside** this **sea** John saw the martyred dead, the same group described in 7:9-17.

15:3-4. The victorious saints **sang** with harps **the song of Moses . . . and the song of the Lamb**. These may be two separate songs, the first referring to God’s faithfulness to Israel and the second referring to their present situation in the Great Tribulation. Some, like Walter Scott, refer the song of Moses to Exodus 15 where Israel triumphed over the Egyptians (*Exposition of Revelation*, p. 315). Others, such as J.B. Smith, suggest that this is the song of Deuteronomy 32, which gives a comprehensive review of God’s faithfulness to Israel (*A Revelation of Jesus Christ*, pp. 224-25). In this song in Revelation 15:3-4 God is praised for His great deeds, justice, truth (cf. 16:7), glory, and holiness (see 4:8 for a chart of the 14 doxologies in Rev.). Then a prediction is made that **all the nations will worship** God.

This description of praise to God and prediction of universal worship is in keeping with many other Scriptures and relates, of course, to the second coming of Christ and worship of God by the entire world in the millennial kingdom (Pss. 2:8-9; 24:1-10; 66:1-4; 72:8-11; 86:9; Isa. 2:2-4; 9:6-7; 66:18-23; Jer. 10:7; Dan. 7:14; Zeph. 2:11; Zech. 14:9). The awful hour of wickedness and blasphemy against God, which will characterize the period leading up to the Second Coming, will be followed by a full vindication of God’s judgment and holiness in the next period.

²Radmacher, Earl D. ; Allen, Ronald Barclay ; House, H. Wayne: *The Nelson Study Bible : New King James Version*. Nashville : T. Nelson Publishers, 1997, S. Re 15:1

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cf. *confer*, compare

15:5-8. As John continued to look at the heavenly vision, he saw **the temple** described as **the tabernacle of Testimony**. The allusion to a temple **in heaven** seems to be the heavenly counterpart of the earthly temple. As it was opened, **the seven angels with their plagues** exited from it. The **clean, shining linen** of the angels indicates their purity, and the **golden sashes around their chests** point to the glory of God.

John saw **one of the four living creatures** give the **seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God** to the seven angels. When this was done, **smoke** filled **the temple**, making it impossible for anyone to **enter it until the seven plagues** were poured out on the earth (cf. Ex. 40:34-35). Taken as a whole, Revelation 15:5-8 presents a fearful picture of impending divine judgment on a wicked world. The judgments which are to be poured out (chap. 16) fully justify this ominous introduction.³

1. *Seven angels with seven plagues. 15:1.*

15:1. In 10:7 it was stated that the mystery of God was finished, but no details were given. They are now seen in chapters 15–16. To introduce these fearful judgments called **plagues**, John is shown a **sign in heaven** (cf. 12:1, 3), which is characterized as **great and marvelous**. The concept of greatness is here, because in scope and intensity there has been nothing previous to this to compare with them. The idea of marvel is introduced, because the inflictions will excite amazement and wonder. These plagues are marked as last, because in them the wrath of God is fully spent upon ungodly mankind.

2. *The godly victors. 15:2–4.*

2–4. Before judgment falls, John saw a company of victors with harps of God. They are the ones mentioned in 14:2–3. Why the reference to **a sea of glass**? These who have triumphed over the beast (cf. ch. 13) have paid the supreme price and have entered into bliss. The sea may have reference to the bronze laver in the tabernacle of Moses and the bronze sea in the Temple. Here its waters are not disturbed any longer; it is that which is unalterable and firm. Purity is indicated here, but it has been attained at the cost of trials under the beasts (so the fire). As in 14:2, they have harps to accompany their praise to God.

The theme of their harp playing is the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb (cf. Ex 15:1–18). What do these songs have in common? They both celebrate redemption and deliverance. In the first case, it was God’s physical release of Israel from Egyptian servitude through the Passover Lamb; here it is liberation spiritually from the bondage of Satan and his agents through “Christ our Passover” (cf. I Cor 5:7). In their singing they extol God’s great and marvelous works, His righteousness and truth, His sovereignty over the nations, His holiness, and ultimate reception of universal worship through the disclosure of His righteous dealings.

3. *The temple in heaven. 15:5–8.*

5–8. In order to underscore the holiness of God in His righteous judgments on sinful man, John is granted a view **of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven**. Ready to perform their duties, **the seven angels** (cf. vs. 1) proceed from the temple fully equipped for their tasks. They are priests as well as angels, because their attire of **pure and white linen** and **golden girdles**

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³Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:965

marks them as God's priests (cf. 1:13 of Christ). Seiss has aptly indicated (op. cit., p. 370): "They appear as priests, because they come for the sacrificing of a great sacrifice to the offended holiness and justice of God."

Notice how all is pervaded with gold, an emblem of the holiness and righteousness of God (cf., e.g., the cherubim of gold over the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies). One of the four living creatures at the command of God presented **the seven angels seven golden vials full of the wrath of God**. The **vials** of the AV (derived from the Gr *phialē*) is too weak to convey the idea that the receptacles were bowls, like those used for pouring libations in the Old Testament. (Cf. Zech 12:2 where the translation "cup" is inadequate; "bowl" is intended from the Heb word employed.)

The **smoke** filling the temple came from the incense of the priests' censers (cf. 8:5). Two attributes of God are now underscored: His **power** and His **glory**. Where God's glory is manifested, man is unable to abide the sight. So it was with Moses (cf. Ex 40:34–35) and in Solomon's day (cf. I Kgs 8:10–11). So solemn and grave is the action that **no man was able to enter into the temple, till the seven plagues of the seven angels were fulfilled** (the chapter beginning and ending with the concept of finality and irretrievability).⁴

AV Authorized Version

⁴ *KJV Bible Commentary*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1994, S. 2695