

Ministry of Grace

Revelation Chapter 15 Speaker's Notes

A common device used in prophetic writing is to describe an event or a series of events and then go back over the same events adding more detail, or describing things that were skipped over. This is what John is doing in this chapter. In the previous chapter he told us about the two harvests that will occur at the end of the age. Those two harvests, the grain harvest and the grape harvest, occur at the very end of the tribulation as a prelude to the Sheep and Goat Judgment. Before the two harvests, however, the earth is to be plagued by the seven bowl judgments which are described in this chapter and the next. This chapter serves as an introduction to these bowl judgments, whereas the next chapter will give details about the seven bowl judgments as they will be poured out on the permanent earth dwellers.

John begins this chapter with a vision of a sea of glass. This is the same glass floor that he talked about back in chapter 4 when he first described the throne room of God. The difference is that here John says the sea of clear glass is “mixed” with fire. This could be an indication that the glassy floor is turning red as the anger of God is being expressed. Our translation (ESV) says that the overcomers are standing “by” the sea of glass. However, the Greek texts say that they are standing “upon” the sea of glass, so obviously it is not literal fire.

John says these overcomers are singing a song. The song they sing is referred to as “the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb. At the conclusion of the song, the seven angels come out of the sanctuary of the tabernacle. Then one of the four living ones (there is one on each side of the throne), gives them the bowls filled full of the wrath of God. Finally, the sanctuary of the tabernacle is filled with smoke and the focus turns to the seven angels who will pour out God’s judgment against the permanent earth dwellers.

Revelation 15:1

Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished.

“sign” –This is from the Greek word *sēmeion*, which means “a sign or miracle with a spiritual end and purpose.” Even though we are taking a literal interpretive view of Revelation, this tells us that the following is not to be taken literally, but figuratively. There are six signs mentioned in Revelation. Three of them are ones that John saw. The first two were:

And a great **sign** appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. (Revelation 12:1)

And another **sign** appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. (Revelation 12:3)

The other three references to “signs” in Revelation are those produced by the false prophet and demons.

It (the beast out of the earth, that is, the false prophet) performs great **signs**, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, (**Revelation 13:13**)

For they are demonic spirits, performing **signs**, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. (**Revelation 16:14**)

And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the **signs** by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. (**Revelation 19:20**)

“seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last” – Notice that the seven angels already have the plagues. They are about to be given bowls full of God’s wrath to pour out with these plagues. Notice also, these are the final judgments to be executed upon the earth.

“plagues” – “*plēgē*” This Greek word means a stroke, stripe, blow, wound or injury. Secondly, it means a plague or a calamity inflicted by God.

“is finished” – literally “was brought to an end.” With the pouring out of these seven bowls, God’s wrath is completely demonstrated.

Revelation 15:2

And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire--and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.

“of glass” – This is from the Greek word *hualinos*, meaning transparent like glass. In John’s first description of the throne room of God, he used the same word to describe the floor.

and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: (**Revelation 4:6**)

On Mount Sinai, Moses and the elders of Israel were given a vision of God in His throne room with a similar description of the floor; clear, though blue in color:

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. (**Exodus 24:9, 10**)

“mingled” – This is from the Greek word *mignumi*, meaning to mix or intermingle as wine is mixed with water. The image here is of this glassy clear floor of the throne room of God also being filled with flames of fire, or at least the color of fire. Fire is usually associated with God’s judgment. And, this is precisely what is about to occur, as we will see in the next chapter.

“those who had conquered the beast ...” – As we discussed in chapter 2, the word “conquered” is translated from the Greek verb *nikaō*, which means, “to be victorious” or “to overcome.” The English word “conquered” implies overt, aggressive action ‘against’ the enemy. Other translations use the English words “overcoming” or “been victorious.” I like these better because they do not imply aggression, rather they imply perseverance. We noted before, the Apostle John gives us the key to overcoming:

For everyone who has been born of God **overcomes** the world. And this is the victory that has **overcome** the world--our faith. Who is it that **overcomes** the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:4, 5)

This tells us that those who get saved during the tribulation will overcome because they believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that He is coming back very soon to set-up His Kingdom. In the same manner as those of us in the church age, those who get saved during the tribulation will be saved by faith and faith alone.

“conquered the beast” – Literally this reads, “the ones being victorious **out of the beast and out of his image and out of his mark out of the number of his name ...**” This grammatical construction is unique in Greek literature found only here. It does not signify “victory over the Beast, over his image, and over his mark,” but “coming triumphantly out from under the control of the beast, his image, and his mark ...” These are the ones about whom in chapter twelve it was said:

And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. (Revelation 12:11)

“standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands” – The word translated “beside” is *epi*, which means “on or over.” Therefore, we see that the conquerors were standing “on” the sea of glass, not “beside” it.

“with harps of God in their hands” – “harps” is translated from the Greek word *kitharas*, from which we get our English word, “guitar.” The *kithara* did not have a neck, like the guitar of today. It was more like a modern-day harp with 10 strings, although it was played with a plectrum, or pick.

Revelation 15:3, 4

And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."

“song of Moses” and “song of the Lamb” – There is much discussion as to what is meant by these expressions. Some claim that there are two distinct songs being sung and others claim a single song. The words of the song written in the text here seem to indicate that it is a single song. There are several songs attributed to Moses in the Old Testament but only one of them matches this song in subject matter; a song of God’s righteous judgment and victory over sin and sinners. The Old Testament song was sung by the Israelites after having been rescued from the Egyptian army at the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 15:1-18). But there is no song in Scripture recorded as the “song of the Lamb.”

Both the songs, the one in Exodus 15 and the one in Revelation 5, are praising God for having overcome the sinful world system, and both are songs of redemption and judgment over the world and of rescuing both Jews and Gentiles out of the judgment on the world. The judgment by God on the Egyptians was righteous and necessary and this judgment on the worldly permanent earth dwellers is righteous and necessary. The rescue of the Jews out of Egypt is a “type” of the rescue portrayed here. Therefore, we have to conclude that “the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb” is a reference to a single song.

Revelation 15:5

After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened,

“After this” – (literally, “after these things”) This is an indication that what John is about to describe is not part of the “sign,” but a further description of the heavenly events that will occur during the tribulation period on earth.

“sanctuary” – This is from the Greek word *naos*, which we saw back in **Revelation 11:1** referring to the dwelling place of God. In the earthly temple, *heiron* is the word that is used to refer to the entire temple area, whereas *naos* refers to the single building containing the holy place and the Holy of Holies. In this verse, it is most likely a reference to the heavenly Holy of Holies of which the earthly one was a type. Within the earthly Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant which held the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments, the rod of Aaron, and the manna. On top of the ark was the mercy seat where God was said to reside. These were all testaments of the sovereignty, authority, and mercy of God.

“tent” – This is from the Greek word *skēnē*, meaning “a tent made from animal skins.” This is often translated as “tabernacle.”

“tent of witness” – Again we see the heavenly tabernacle of which the earthly one was only a type. In their wandering through the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt, the Jews were told to build a tabernacle (tent), which represented the dwelling place of God.

“was opened” – In the earthly tabernacle (and temple), the Holy of Holies was separated from the Holy Place by a thick curtain. Only the High Priest was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies and only on one day of the year. Therefore, only the high priest could behold the Ark of the Covenant. Now that the redeeming work of Christ is complete and God’s wrath is about to be poured out on the unbelieving “permanent earth dwellers,” the tabernacle will be open to all who were cleansed by the blood of the Lamb.

Revelation 15:6

and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests.

The fact that the seven angels come out of the Holy of Holies is evidence of the fact that these seven last judgments are coming directly from God. These are God’s judgments about to be executed on the Beast, the False Prophet, and all those who follow them.

“the seven angels with the seven plagues” – Notice that the seven angels already have the seven plagues. These plagues are executed by the action of the angels pouring out the “wrath of God,” which is contained within the seven bowls. The Greek text says “the seven angels having (present participle) the seven plagues.”

“clothed in pure bright linen” – The white linen represents holiness and purity.

“with golden sashes around their chests” – The word “sashes” is from the Greek word *dzonē*, meaning “something that is wrapped around.” The word “around” is from the Greek word *peridzōnnumi*, meaning “to wrap around.” Thus, this literally says, “having their upper bodies wrapped around with a wrap.” It is likely that this item was like a golden ephod that went from their armpits to their waist. These golden ephods represent riches, royalty, and unblemished glory.

Revelation 15:7

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,

“four living creatures” – These are the four seraphim (seraphs) that surround the throne of God in the heavenly scene. One of these four delivered the bowls of God’s wrath to the seven angels.

“bowls” – This is the Greek word *phialas*, which refers to a broad, shallow bowl which we would call a saucer. It was typically used as a drinking vessel. In the temple ceremonies it was used to carry incense. These particular bowls are filled full with the wrath of God and are about to be poured out on the earth and its inhabitants, the “permanent earth dwellers.” Notice, again, that the angels already have the seven plagues. These seven bowls contain God’s wrath!

Revelation 15:8

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.

Smoke and clouds are repeatedly used as symbols of the presence and the glory of God.

The exodus from Egypt

And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. **And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud** to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people. (Exodus 13:20-22)

The presence of God on Mount Sinai

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a **thick cloud on the mountain** and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now **Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke** because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The **smoke** of it went up like the **smoke** of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. (Exodus 19:16-18)

Isaiah’s vision of God’s throne room

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, **and the house was filled with smoke.** (Isaiah 6:1-4)

The filling of the tabernacle upon its completion

And he erected the court around the tabernacle and the altar, and set up the screen of the gate of the court. So Moses finished the work. **Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.** And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because **the cloud settled on it**, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, **whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle**, the people of Israel would set out. **But if the cloud was not taken up**, then they did not set

out till the day that it was taken up. **For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night,** in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys. (Exodus 40:33-38)

The filling of Solomon's temple after its completion

And when the priests came out of the Holy Place (for all the priests who were present had consecrated themselves, without regard to their divisions, and all the Levitical singers, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, their sons and kinsmen, arrayed in fine linen, with cymbals, harps, and lyres, stood east of the altar with 120 priests who were trumpeters; and it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the LORD), and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the LORD, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever," **the house, the house of the LORD, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God.** (2Chronicles 5:11-14)

So What?

As we noted previously, in this vision we see the overcomers standing on the sea of glass mingled with fire, singing a song. Specifically, they are singing:

Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! O Lord, who will not fear and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed

Consider this: the Israelites had been living in Egypt under the watchful eye of the Egyptians. They were slaves to the Egyptians. They had no freedoms. The Egyptians at the time were the most powerful nation on the earth and there was nothing the Israelites could do to overcome their oppressors.

So, God brought plagues against Egypt. The water of the Nile River was turned to blood, the land was infested with frogs, then with lice, then with flies. Next, God killed the livestock of the Egyptians followed by infesting the people with boils all over their own bodies as well as the bodies of their animals. God brought massive hail mixed with fire that destroyed anything left outside, including servants, animals, and their crops. And – the crops that weren't destroyed by the hail were eaten up by locusts. After the plague of locusts there was intense darkness all over the land of Egypt (except where the Israelites were living). Finally, God killed the first-born of all the Egyptians and their animals.

After these 10 severe plagues against Egypt, Pharaoh finally gave Moses permission to lead the Israelites into the wilderness to worship the Lord, but then he changed his mind. In spite of all the damage that had been inflicted on Egypt by the ten plagues, Pharaoh sent his army, the mightiest army in the world, after the Israelites. When the army caught up with them, the Israelites were pinned against the Red Sea and had no way of escape.

But - God provided a miraculous escape for the children of Israel. And – not only did God give them a path to safety through the parting of the Red Sea, He also decimated their enemy, the mightiest army in the world.

Now, notice the similarity to the situation of the tribulation saints. They will be living in an ungodly world where their very lives are in danger simply because they believe in the one true God. As a

result, God is going to send the seven last plagues on the permanent earth dwellers. Loathsome sores will break-out on everyone having the mark of the beast. The sea will turn to blood, Rivers and springs of water will turn to blood. The sun will become scorching hot (climate change?). Suddenly, there will be intense darkness everywhere in the beast's kingdom. The Euphrates River will be dried up (climate change, again?), allowing China to send a massive army to help destroy Israel. Finally, there will be an earthquake so powerful that all mountains, except Mt. Zion, will be flattened and all islands will disappear.

In spite of all of these catastrophic events, the beast and the permanent earth dwellers will still try to wipe out the Israelites. Once again, God will provide a miracle. This time He comes in person to destroy all of His enemies. It is at this point that the tribulation saints will sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb.

Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed. (Revelation 15:3-4)

So, what about Christians today, right now? We're not being oppressed like the Israelites were or like the tribulation saints will be. We have the freedom to worship God freely. So, which is greater, the praise given to God by people who have been rescued from dire situations, or the praise given by people who recognize that God has kept them out of dire situations?

It's a fact that churches become stronger when they are persecuted, while churches that don't suffer any persecution often grow weaker. Part of the reason is that churches that are not suffering persecution tend to get lazy in their faith and they don't focus on all that God is doing for them. They don't pray as much and when they do, their prayers become less and less meaningful. They don't seek God's face and God's favor as much. They don't spend as much time reading God's word and their confessional life becomes non-existent. As a result, their fellowship with our Father becomes weaker and their praise becomes hollow and artificial. These are all signs of a sick church.

Let's not fall into that trap. Let's take our focus off ourselves and keep it squarely on God. Let's take a few minutes to recognize God's manifold blessings on our individual lives and on this church. Then, let's take some time to pray, followed by the singing of our praises to God.

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