

**Series:** 7 Bowls with 7 Plagues (a study in Revelation 15-16)

**Sermon Text:** 16:8-16 Plague Bowls 4-6

(Use **app** to get

lesson/slides, ask questions)

Last time we unpacked how **God's judgments are always true, just, and deserved**. He alone has the character and clarity of judgment to bring about true justice. Someone who read ahead noticed that everyone in this *bowl plague* refuses to repent unlike those who turned to God during the 7 seals and 7 trumpets. For this reason, many view these last 7 plagues as the final judgment. Today, as we continue trudging through this troubling chapter, we'll contemplate this heartbreaking...

**BIG IDEA:** Some stubborn people will never turn to God.

Let's begin with *verses 8-11* where John wrote: *The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory. The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast* (likely God's answer to *13:4* where they boasted "Who is like the Beast and able to make war with him?"), *and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds. Let's be clear:* These are not folks who are unsure about God, rather they seem to acknowledge God's authority over the plagues and stubbornly won't yield to His eternal power and divine nature (cf. Romans 1:18-32). Like Egypt's Pharaoh who Moses confronted in the Exodus, *they love self at the expense of others and reason*. Claiming to be enlightened, their system is *plunged into an anguishing darkness* like how Egypt's *darkness* could be felt in Exodus 10:21. John also said *the fierce heat scorched them* which means to brand/sear with a hot iron like in *13:16* where people who *worshiped Satan's* system *were marked on the right hand or forehead*. The mention of "*liars whose consciences are seared*" 1 Timothy 4 supports this being a symbol of their reality, not a physical brand. Rather than let the *fire* of God's judgment purify them, they let it seal their fate like a flame-seared Burger King Whopper. Again, these aren't innocent folks who don't know better or may change their minds over time, rather they are undeterrable people who must always have it

their way, never God's way. Again, **verse 6** unequivocally declares that ***this is what they deserve!***

Let's keep reading in **verse 12**: ***The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east.*** While much of this will be unpacked in **Revelation 17-18**, just know that Israel and Rome relied on ***the Euphrates River*** to protect them from eastern enemies. Among other things, this ***plague*** reveals the futility of worshiping creation over Creator (cf. Romans 1:18-32). The ***water drying up*** recalls God parting the Red Sea, only this is a "reverse Exodus" like **chapter 11** where He let nations trample the holy city for 42 months. Now, notice how **verses 13-14** allude to the ***plague of frogs*** from the Exodus: ***And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon (Satan) and out of the mouth of the (sea) beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet (the land beast), three unclean spirits like frogs. 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.*** This recalls **chapter 13** where the land beast promoted the satanically inspired empire of the sea beast. Professor Scott Duvall (p. 216-217) thinks "The repetition of 'mouth' indicates that their chief weapon is not military in nature, but demon-inspired rhetoric and propaganda that deceives (cf. 13:3, 12-14)." While opinions vary on what this symbolizes, it echoes John's point from **chapters 11-13** that spiritual warfare is always going on behind the scenes. Ephesians 6:11-13 says, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm." I wonder, "How might the double use of 'take up the whole armor' imply a tendency to be unprepared for spiritual warfare?" Specifically, "How could our zeal to be protected from physical attacks cause misplaced hope and leave us open to satanic mind games?"

Now, look at **verse 15**, where Jesus suddenly interjected by quoting HIMSELF from Revelation 3:3, (***"Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who***

*stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!").* Such words are often viewed as 2<sup>nd</sup> coming images, yet Jesus didn't mean that in **chapters 2-3** where He counseled churches to *"buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen.* If they didn't repent, He vowed to *"come like a thief"* (3:3) and *"remove their lampstand"* (2:5). While we do anticipate a future, face- to-face meeting with Jesus, "Must Christ physically return to do all this, or might this be His Spirit at work?" The mind-bending Bible tells us that Jesus is here AND there, His Spirit has returned BUT He is to come, His kingdom is here YET arriving! While we're at it, let's pile on the infamous words of **verse 16:** ***And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.*** Scholars tell us, *"It refers to the place called Harmagedōn in Hebrew, meaning 'the mount of Megiddo.' Megiddo was not a 'mountain,' but was famous as the site of many significant battles in Israel's history (e.g., Judg. 5:19; 2 Kings 23:29; 2 Chron. 35:22; Zech. 12:11). It became a symbol of the epic eschatological battle between God and the forces of evil. While some see human armies gathering in the future at this exact location in northern Palestine to fight against God's people, a symbolic interpretation seems more likely since geographical names in Revelation like 'Babylon' often represent larger realities. In either case, this very real, epic battle is anticlimactic since Christ conquers merely by his appearance. The battle and its outcome are reported in 19:11–21 (where) Jesus defeats his enemies, judging them by his word."* (Duvall, 216-217).

Some turn this promise passage into predictions of the Lord's return or a battle to defeat sin, death, and hell. Yet, "Didn't Christ's resurrection prove those foes are already defeated?" So, "Should hope be anchored in what Jesus will do or already did?" Some say that B.I.B.L.E. is an acronym for *"Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth"*, but I say there's more to the story. I mean, "Is Scripture merely a manual for escaping earth and going to heaven or is it a grander story of God and His kingdom coming to us?". To me, the manual view reduces the gospel to *"being right/on the right side"* but the grander view reveals a *"duty to partner with Jesus in caring for this world."* In our app, someone asked: "What happens when Jesus comes

back?” While that’s a fine question, along with “What’s Heaven like?”, the biblical storyline offers few details on such things. Instead, it emphasizes how the gospel empowers us to overcome obstacles in this broken world and partner with Jesus to restore it.

Some think that Jesus must physically return before things get better, but texts like Colossians 1:15ff NLT suggest that much has already changed: “*Christ is the visible image of the invisible God...He made the things we can see and the things we can't see--such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world...God made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross. This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault. But you must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it. Don't drift away from the assurance you received when you heard the Good News.*” John’s message in Revelation is the same as Paul’s in Colossians...endure, overcome, and make a positive impact like Jesus did. Both warn us to **wake up**, resist, and speak into systems currently being dismantled by what Jesus did on the cross. We may think there’s not much for us in a text where the **BIG IDEA is: Some stubborn people will never turn to God**. Yet shockingly, **Revelation 16** warns that if we don’t **stay awake** and **remain clothed** by Christ, we may end up **naked, exposed**, and enslaved to the systems of this world and participate in her defeat. What a sad, unnecessary reversal of Exodus that would be, and I should ask: “In what ways are you mimicking or surrendering to this world rather than partnering with Jesus in restoring it?” As you ponder all this with God’s people, remember, next steps need not be taken alone--let Christ’s church be your supportive family!

**Sunday to Monday Connection:** Rather than beg for evacuation, Jesus overcame the enemy's seductive temptations by leaning into a pre-existing relationship with God’s Spirit who empowered Him to walk in the light of God’s Word.

- **Question:** How have you been able to tell the difference between the enemy's temptations and God's invitations?
- **Next Step:** You are encouraged to talk with your people, your small group, about your experiences of God's invitations and also share how you discerned them to be from God...And as you each share, I wonder what you might learn from each other!?
- **Note:** If you are not a Christ follower and would like to investigate further what all this might mean for you, please come talk with any of our leaders, or the person who brought you.

**Takeaways to discuss with your people** (in addition to the underlined questions above!):

1. If Revelation 16 is meant to be a promise and not a prediction, then what is the blessing/warning and what is the basis for it? How can getting caught up in the world's systems and rhetoric keep us from participating in the blessing promised?
2. How does Revelation 16 compare with Revelation 3? What is the Spirit saying to you, and what is He saying to us?
3. In what ways does Christ's temptation (Matthew 4, Luke 4) teach us to rely on God's Word and God's Spirit? Jesus prepared for this moment, like we can, as described in [this article about meditating on and memorizing God's Word](#). Be sure to also discuss how time in Scripture must be more than prep for a pop quiz or mining for ammunition to use against others/the world.
4. Besides "*making it to heaven*", what other categories do biblical authors ask us to consider related to the gospel? For example, if the resurrection and not the rapture is the hope of the church, then how should this increase our confidence in Scripture and the Spirit to work through us to bring more heaven to earth now, not just later?
5. Knowing that some stubborn people will never turn to God, when might such people need to be marked or identified? Some may brand this as unloving or cruel, but churches are warned in books like 1 John and Jude about [people who are so dangerous](#) that they [must be avoided](#). This suggests that Godly love is also like a 2-sided coin in that it simultaneously invites people to follow God, but it also protects people from evil (cf. 1 Corinthians 13). Can you think of historical events where this tougher love may have been necessary? When might pastors and churches be wise to mark people while simultaneously offering everyone the opportunity to repent and be restored?

**Quotes related to this passage:**

- **Verse 9:** "Here is the New Testament's most cogent description of the normal behavior of hardened sinners. They cursed the name of God ... instead of turning from their sins, the result of which would have been to give him glory. Although God had the authority over these plagues, these unbelievers, in their irrationality, instead of entreating the only one who could help them, curse him. They recognize that God controls the plagues but blame him instead of themselves, since, being amoral and materialistic, they see no causal

connection between their own sinful behavior and these events as judgment. They remain unrepentant throughout the chapter (see vv. 11, 21 and v. 2).” (Stern, Re 16:9)

- **The stubbornly unrepentant:** “16:9–11, 21 They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God. Three times we are told that the ungodly respond to these divine judgments by refusing to repent of their evil deeds, including their demon worship, idolatry, murder, magic arts, sexual immorality, deception, and theft (16:9, 11, 21; cf. 2:20–22; 9:20–21; 21:8; 22:15). In spite of the judgments, they refuse to change their thinking or alter their lifestyles. They never accept responsibility for their own sinfulness but curse or blaspheme (blasphēmēō) God instead. In spite of the severe suffering, symbolized by the gnawing of their tongues (v. 10), there is no hint of humility, much less repentance or submission in worship.” (Duvall, 216)
- **The River Euphrates:** “The center of the major pagan civilizations that pressed against Israel in Tanakh times, and when Revelation was written it was the center of the Parthian kingdom which continually warred with Rome. Think of the Euphrates as the launching point of attack, whether of angel-mediated judgment (9:14), the kings from the east (v. 12), or the whole inhabited world (v. 14).” (Stern, Re 16:12)
- **Helpful history:** “When the Persians attacked Babylon, they captured the impregnable fortress of Babylon by diverting the Euphrates, which flowed under the wall of the city, and marching the troops down the dry riverbed into the heart of the city (Herodotus Histories 1.190–191). The image here recalls that event. ‘In the OT God is always the one who dries up the water, whether for redemption or judgment’ (Beale 1999:827).” (Mulholland, 548)
- **Frogs:** “Again there is an echo of the plagues of Egypt, since the ‘unclean spirits’ that come out of the mouths of the Unholy Trinity appear like frogs, able to hop to and fro with their specious stories and plausible arguments, persuading the great and powerful to commit themselves to a hopeless cause. No wonder John tells his readers that they need to keep awake. This is very, very dangerous territory. Anyone who has lived through the build-up to a war, where suddenly all the newspapers and television stations seem to be pushing one way, and the frog-like, hopping-to-and-fro thing called ‘public opinion’ happens to go along with the prevailing mood, will know what John is talking about, and why he issues this warning.” (Wright, 147)
- **Armageddon:** “This penultimate judgment begins with the removal of the barrier between God’s people and their enemies, symbolized by the ‘great river Euphrates.’ The ‘kings from the East’ (16:12) and the ‘kings of the whole world’ (16:14) represent pagan political powers allied with the beast. The likely background is Ezekiel 38–39, where Gog and Magog depict enemies who war against God’s people (Rev. 19:17; 20:7–8). (Duvall, 216)
- **The Hebrew name Armageddon.** “This term (along with ‘the mark of the beast’) has generated more heat and less light than any other term in Revelation. John’s attention to the fact that this is a Hebrew term is significant. It is the clue to its use, since it is a transliteration of the Hebrew, har megiddo

(mountain of Megiddo). This reference is significant in Jewish history. The city of Megiddo was located on the edge of the plain of Megiddo, a place of decisive events in the history of the Jewish people. It was near Megiddo that Deborah and the Israelites defeated Sihon's forces (Judg 4–5). Megiddo was where Ahaziah, the apostate king, died at the hands of Jehu (2 Kgs 9:27). It was at Megiddo that King Josiah attempted to stop Pharaoh Neco from attacking the Assyrians and was killed (2 Kgs 23:29). While there is no 'Mount Megiddo,' there is a significant mountain near Megiddo—Mount Carmel. It was there that Elijah overcame the prophets of Baal in a time when the faithful people of God were being pursued and killed by Jezebel (1 Kgs 18). John's play upon the Hebrew term, therefore, provides an image that denotes a place of decisive conflict between God and his enemies." (Mulholland, 548-549)

- Megiddo:** "The place which in Hebrew is called Har Megiddo ('Mount Megiddo') or possibly 'Ir Megiddo' ('City of Megiddo'). The Greek word here is 'Armageddon'—there is no Greek letter to represent the Hebrew 'h' sound, and 'n' is often added to Greek renderings of foreign words. But in Zechariah 12:10–11, which also places Megiddo in the context of the Last Days, the Hebrew word is actually 'Megiddon': '...they will look on Me whom they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only son....On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning of Hadad-Rimmon in the valley of Megiddon.' Hadad-Rimmon was the place in the Valley of Yizre'el (Jezreel) near Megiddo where king Yoshiyahu (Josiah) fell at the hands of Pharaoh Nechoh in 609 B.C.E. (2 Kings 23:29–30). The city of Megiddo, which overlooks the Yizre'el Valley and guards a major pass on the ancient Via Maris ('Way of the Sea') connecting Egypt with Syria, has seen many battles and much mourning. The archeological remains, spanning a period from the Chalcolithic Age (4th millennium B.C.E.) to the Persian conquest (7th century C.E.), consist of twenty levels, indicating the city was destroyed and rebuilt many times. In this valley Dvorah and Barak defeated the Canaanites (Judges 4–5; Megiddo is mentioned at Judges 5:19) and Gideon the Midianites (Judges 6–8). In modern times both Napoleon (1799) and General Allenby (1918) defeated the Turks near Megiddo. The hundred square miles of the Yizre'el Valley would provide more than enough space for the conflict envisioned in the book of Revelation. However, the final war may not take place at Har Megiddo at all, but in Jerusalem, at Har Migdo, the 'mount of his choice fruit,' i.e., the mountain of God's blessing, Mount Zion. Mount Zion has already been mentioned at 14:1; moreover, the imagery resembles Joel's picture of the Day of Adonai, when God's power goes forth from Mount Zion against the forces of evil (Joel 2:1–11, 4:16–17 (3:16–17); compare also Isaiah 31:4–9). The next passage (vv. 17–21) resembles 14:14–20, which also draws on imagery from Joel 4 (see 14:14–20). Strengthening the case further Zechariah 12:11, cited above, mentions Jerusalem along with Megiddon." (Stern, Re 16:12-16)
- Verse 15:** "This is so surprising that some modern readers of Revelation have imagined that a later copyist has placed verse 15 here by accident. But a very

odd accident it would be: why this, why here? It's much more likely, I suggest, that John is aware, as the plagues become more terrible, that some of his hearers might nod off, not physically but spiritually. How easy to think, 'Oh, yes, those people have got it coming to them—they are wicked and they deserve it; but we're all right, we can just relax. Let's sit back and enjoy the movie.' No, you can't, John is saying. I'm talking about the serious danger of deceitful spirits let loose into the world. Many of you have a poor track record at recognizing deceit when it stares you in the face. You need to keep awake, otherwise Jesus might arrive and find your head just coming to rest on your arms. That would be the wrong mistake to make. These final three plagues, which complete the sequence of the seven bowls, are terrible indeed, and part of their terror is the sense of how easy it is to give allegiance to the systems that are here under judgment." (Wright, 145-146)

- **Christ's blessing in verses 15-17:** "This 'parenthesis' provides the central spiritual message for the readers—in light of the coming battle, Christians should remain faithful and resist compromise. Jesus had repeatedly warned his followers to stay alert because his return would occur suddenly and (for some) unexpectedly, like a thief in the middle of the night (e.g., Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39; Rev. 3:3; cf. 1 Thess. 5:2, 4; 2 Pet. 3:10). Nakedness symbolizes shame, guilt, and liability to judgment (cf. 3:4–5, 17–18; 19:8–9)." (Duvall, 217)
- **A system that hardens hearts:** "The repetition of the three blasphemies of the beast (13:6) by the citizens of fallen Babylon (16:9, 11, 21) confirms the deep inner shaping of their being by the perspective of the beast. This perspective rejects God as having any relevant role in any aspect of individual or community life. The most dangerous aspect of this perspective, however, is how it creates an inability to respond to God's love and holiness in ways that enable cleansing, healing, liberation, and transformation toward wholeness. When citizens of fallen Babylon begin to experience the destructive and debilitating consequences of their life without God, they rarely see this as a touch of God seeking to awaken them to their condition and call them out of their brokenness into God's wholeness. Instead, they blame others or society or government or big business or technology or leading nations for either causing their plight or failing to resolve their problems. Citizens of fallen Babylon rarely ever realize that the root of their condition lies deep within their own life and not in the circumstances and conditions of the world around them. They believe it is the surrounding world that needs to change to make things better, not they. Such a perspective makes it extremely difficult to repent. It is much easier to curse the supposed cause of the problem than to acknowledge with Walt Kelly's 'Pogo' that 'we have met the enemy and he is us.' Repentance emerges out of recognition of one's complicity in the root cause of the problem. Cursing emerges from a self-referenced structure of being that vigorously protects itself from any hint of complicity in the problem by locating its root cause outside oneself. Even when one's whole world is imploding under the weight of monstrous hailstones, the problem still lies 'outside.'" (Mulholland, 549-550)



- **Naked and ashamed.** “This is an image of captivity in Jewish history. Prisoners of war were stripped and led away naked as a sign of their total defeat and humiliation (see 2 Chr 28:15; Isa 20:2–4; Ezek 16:39; 23:29). The implication is that unless the faithful keep themselves undefiled by fallen Babylon they will participate in her defeat.” (Mulholland, 548)
- **Preparation, not prediction:** “Jesus made it unmistakably clear that the end will come suddenly and unexpectedly, even noting in a most puzzling statement that he himself does not know when it will occur. (On the sudden and unexpected nature of the final act of history, see Matt 24:37–44; 25:1–13; Mark 13:34–37. On Jesus’ own unawareness of the time, see Matt 24:36.) Paul and Peter reiterated the same perspective (see 1 Thess 5:1–3; 2 Pet 3:10). In the book of Revelation, Jesus twice repeats the indication of his return at a totally unexpected time, for he will come like a thief in the night (3:3; 16:15; cf. 1 Thess 5:2). In all these instances, the issue for Christians is not prediction but preparedness. Citizens of God’s New Jerusalem are called to live their lives in such true discipleship that whenever the end comes it does not find them unprepared but living fully in loving, responsive relationship with Christ in all the aspects of their lives.” (Mulholland, 550)

### **Considerations for discussion leaders:**

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Single underlined sentences are for discussion, while key points are double underlined.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

**Other Articles/Songs/Videos:** Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- [5 Strategies for Reading Revelation](#) from the Bible Project (the first 17 minutes is GOLD!)
- [Heaven and Earth Theme](#) from the Bible Project
- [Other super helpful Revelation summaries](#) from the Bible Project
- [How Revelation mimics ancient Olympic games](#) by Marty Solomon

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