

GREAT AND MARVELOUS ARE YOUR DEEDS

Revelation 15:1-16:21

Key Verse: 15:3

“...and sang the song of God’s servant Moses and of the Lamb:
‘Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations.’”

One of the main themes of Revelation is God’s final judgment. It is revealed in three series of sevens: seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls. We can find a progression in these judgments. In the seals, one-fourth of the earth is destroyed, in the trumpets one-third and in the bowls the whole earth (6:8; 8:7; 16:1). The three series of judgments do not follow a chronological line. They are more like spirals that repeat some events while adding increasing detail. They all conclude with Jesus’ second coming. They work together like a symphony that repeats and develops a main theme. The bowl judgments are last. The earth is totally destroyed along with all wicked people. At the same time, the beast and his kingdom are plunged into darkness. This judgment is complete and horrible. It will happen just before Christ comes again. When such judgment comes, our first response may be, “It is too harsh.” We may wonder: “Why is this necessary?” “Is this judgment fair?” “Does God really love the world?” “Is there a way to escape this judgment?” We find the answers to all these questions today. As we survey this passage, we can easily be fixated on God’s judgments. But when we study more carefully, we find God’s marvelous love and righteous character. Let us learn who God is and what we should do in the midst of his judgment.

First, just and true are your ways (15:1-4). This section introduces the seven bowl judgments to come, while also concluding the interlude in chapters 12-14. In verses 3-4, those who were victorious over the beast continue to sing praises to God for what he has done--his redemption and judgment. The scene shifts from earth to heaven. John saw another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with seven last plagues--last because with them God’s wrath is completed (1). We have been struggling with coronavirus for such a long time we wonder if it will ever end. Will there be a second wave? In the same way, it seems that God’s wrath goes on and on without end. But there will be an end. It is the final judgment of God’s enemies.

In verse 2 John saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire. This represents the heavenly counterpart to the Red Sea. Fire signifies the judgment of God upon the beast and the wicked. Now John sees the chaotic powers of the sea as calmed by divine sovereignty.¹ Standing beside the sea are those who have been victorious over the beast and its image and over the number of its name. They triumphed over the beast by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony (12:11). They did not give in to the beast's pressure to compromise. They held onto gospel truth to the point of death. Now they watch from heaven as God judges the wicked. They hold harps given them by God and sing a special song of triumph (3a).

This song is called the song of God's servant Moses and of the Lamb. To help us understand the song of the Lamb, John parallels it with the song of Moses. The song of Moses is a historical commemoration of the deliverance of God's people from their enemies. It is found in Exodus 15. The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt for a long time. It was impossible to free themselves by their own effort. However, God freed them by his mighty power. But after they left Egypt, Pharaoh pursued them with his army. They were stuck between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea. They were trapped and paralyzed with fear. Moses calmed their terrified hearts, saying, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again; the LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still" (Ex 14:13-14). God opened the way for them. They crossed the Red Sea by faith. But when the Egyptians tried to do so they were drowned. It was the Israelites' V-Day--the final victory. Then they sang the song of Moses. This song foreshadowed the song of the Lamb. Just as God delivered the Israelites from the power of Pharaoh by the blood of the lamb, he delivered his people, the church, from Satan's power by the blood of the Lamb, Jesus. The day we believe in Jesus is our deliverance day, D-Day. Yet Satan's power remains a threat to us. But at the final judgment God destroys Satan completely. This is our final victory day, V-Day, and we sing the song of the Lamb.

¹ Beale, G.K. and Campbell, David H., *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: Revelation A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), p.317.

The actual contents of the song itself do not come from Exodus 15, but from passages throughout the Old Testament extolling God's character. The first stanza: "Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty" (3a). God's victorious people praised God for his great and marvelous deeds--his glorious acts of salvation and judgment. He could do these things because he is the Lord God Almighty. The phrase "God Almighty," which appears eight times in Revelation, and nowhere else in the NT, emphasizes God's absolute sovereign power. God demonstrated his power to save his people out of his great love. At the same time, God demonstrated his power to judge his enemies out of his justice. Without almighty power there is no salvation. To save us from the power of sin and death, Satan had to be destroyed. The question was who could destroy this powerful enemy and how. This required great wisdom and power. In his great wisdom, God sent his one and only Son Jesus as an atoning sacrifice. In his great power, he raised Jesus from the dead. In this way he demonstrated his love for us. These are the great and marvelous deeds God has done.

The second stanza: "Just and true are your ways, King of the nations" (3b). God's way is always right. No falsehood, lie, or favoritism can be found in him. He is just and true and perfect. Jesus is the King of the nations. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. Usually, when worldly rulers experience power they become corrupt. Then they take advantage of others for their own benefit and become oppressive. It may be impossible for any worldly ruler to be fair and just all the time. That is why people demonstrate against them. To rule the nations, being fair and just is extremely important. It requires great humility and supernatural wisdom. We find no one like this except Jesus. As ruler of the nations, Jesus is fair and just, wise and powerful. The prophet Isaiah described how he would rule: "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him--the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord--and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth" (Isa 11:1-4a). Let us thank Jesus, the only just and fair and almighty Ruler!

The third stanza: "Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy" (4a). When we hear of what God has done with his almighty power and his great wisdom, in justice and fairness, who will not fear him and bring glory to him? People of all nations are longing for such a ruler. One

of the jobs of journalists is to find the weak points of leaders and expose them. But they cannot find any flaw in God because he alone is holy. We see a great response in the final stanza: “All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed” (4b). We praise God for his almighty power, his great wisdom, his justice and fairness, his awesome holiness, and his great and marvelous deeds.

Second, true and just are your judgments (15:5-16:21). 15:5-8 reveals that judgment comes from God. John’s vision shifts to the temple. It is the most holy place in heaven, where God’s very presence is manifest. The temple is described as the tabernacle of the covenant law--referring to the Ten Commandments, revealing the righteous will of God. This tells us that the basis of God’s judgment is not arbitrary but is found in his covenant with mankind. These Ten Commandments are inscribed in the consciences of all people (Ro 2:14-15). Out of the temple came seven angels with the seven plagues (6a). This indicates that judgment originated from God and would be executed by his servants. These angels were dressed in clean, shining linen, and wore golden sashes around their chests (6b). They emanate God’s holiness as worthy instruments to carry out his judgment. One of the living creatures gave them seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives forever and ever. The Eternal God terminates sin. God is so awesome in his wrath--even heavenly beings cannot stand in the midst of his divine glory. No one was able to enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed (8). In that moment, the time for intercession is past; judgment is executed.

In chapter 16:1 God commanded the seven angels, “Go, pour out the seven bowls of God’s wrath on the earth.” Once God’s wrath was poured out on Jesus Christ because of what he did for sinners; now wrath is poured out on sinners because of what they did to Jesus Christ.² This final judgment will come after many, many warnings and calls to repentance. The first bowl was poured out on the land, and caused ugly, festering sores to break out on those who worshiped the beast (2). Suddenly all of the handsome and beautiful celebrities became so ugly and wracked with pain that they hid from television cameras and cried out. Botox and plastic surgery will not help them at the time of God’s judgment. The second bowl was poured out on the sea, and it turned into blood and every living

² MacArthur, John, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Revelation 12-22* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2000), p.133.

thing in the sea died (3). The sea provides vast amounts of oxygen and food, regulates the earth's climate and does much more. When the sea is poisoned it has catastrophic effects on the earth. The third bowl was poured out on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood (4). It results in the total elimination of drinking water on the earth. Neither human beings nor any other creature can survive without water. This will effectively bring about the destruction of almost all people and creatures on earth.

When we see God's wrath poured out in this way, it is shocking. People will wonder how a God of love, compassion and mercy could judge the world like this? So the angel in charge of the waters defended God's righteous judgment, saying: "You are just in these judgments, O Holy One, you who are and who were; for they have shed the blood of your holy people and your prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve" (5-6). The precise purpose of these judgments was to vindicate God's people. The wicked had shed the blood of God's holy people as casually as they drank a cup of water. Now, every time they felt thirst, they had only blood to drink--which confronted them with their great sin. Shedding innocent blood is a serious sin against God that demands an accounting. It is because God made mankind in his own image (Gen 9:5-6). How much more serious this crime is when the blood that has been shed is that of God's own children. God is not unfair in his judgment. The altar also responded: "Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments" (7). Here the altar represents martyrs whose blood was shed by God's enemies. They had been crying, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (6:10) At last, God vindicated them. So his people acknowledged that he is the Lord God Almighty, whose judgement is true and just.

The fourth bowl was poured out on the sun, and the sun was allowed to scorch people with fire (8). The sun is essential for life on earth and a great blessing from God when it is tempered by atmospheric constraints. But this bowl removes those constraints. Now the full force of the sun's rays falls upon the earth. People are seared by the intense heat. In this unbearable pain they should repent. To our surprise, they curse God, recognizing that he has control over the plagues. They hardened their hearts and refused to repent and glorify him (9).

The fifth bowl was poured out on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness (10a). This is a strategic attack against the beast's headquarters, from where it had conceived plans for evil and idol worship. Though the beast and its kingdom had seemed powerful, they could not stand before God's wrath. People who had worshiped the beast gnawed their tongues in agony. They cursed the God of heaven, knowing that their pains and sores were his wrath against them. But they refused to repent of what they had done (11). It is a common response from wicked people that when they experience God's righteous judgment, they harden their hearts, blaspheme God and refuse to repent. We should not harden our hearts toward God. The author of Hebrews exhorts us saying: "...see to it that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'Today,' so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (Heb 3:12-13).

The sixth bowl prepares the way for the final battle between God's people and the enemies of God at a place called "Armageddon" (12-16). In their rage, unrepentant people prepare to assault God. But they will be completely defeated. The Euphrates River had been a protective barrier. By removing this barrier, the kings of the East, enemies of God, were lured in for the final battle. The dragon, the beast and the false prophet are a counterfeit of the Holy Trinity. Demonic spirits that look like frogs come out of each one's mouth. They perform signs that deceive people. Under their influence, kings of the earth think they can win the battle. So all of these kings gather in one place. They seem to be a powerful, irresistible force. However, on the great day of God Almighty, they will be totally defeated.

Verse 15 tells us that the great day of God Almighty is the day Jesus comes again. Jesus said, "Look, I come like a thief!" Jesus will come suddenly and unexpectedly with God's vast, powerful army. This will be a day of victory for him and his people. How can we be blessed on that day? Jesus continued, "Blessed is the one who stays awake and remains clothed, so as not to go naked and be shamefully exposed." These days we are very used to a "stay at home" order. As we stay at home, we should also "stay awake" spiritually. We should not be deceived by the demonic spirits and their signs and become fearful and compromise our faith. We should also remain clothed with the righteousness of Christ. As Jesus counseled the church in Laodicea, we should wear white clothes

that Jesus gives us so that we can cover our shameful nakedness (3:18). We need to depend on Jesus' grace every day and be alert. Then God will bless us when Jesus comes again.

Unaware that Jesus is about to come, the demonic spirits and kings of the earth gather together to a place called "Armageddon." In Hebrew "Armageddon" means "Mount of Megiddo," which was a key city along the major route between the great kingdoms of Mesopotamia and Egypt. God's people had experienced decisive victories there (Jdg 5:19; 2Ch 35:20-22). Thus it is fitting as the location of the climactic battle. However, this name is symbolic; it should not be used as a basis to speculate about geography or the maneuvers of national armies. It is the place of final battle between God's people and the enemies of God.

The seventh bowl is the final destruction of the whole world. It is the end of history. When the seventh bowl was poured out into the air, a loud voice from the throne said, "It is done!" (17) "It is done!" echoes Jesus' words from the cross, "It is finished." Jesus' first cry "*set in motion the breaking in of God's kingdom, yet in such a way that it would only reach fulfillment at the time of the second cry, when there would be not only the final redemption of God's people (Rev 21:1-22:5), but the decisive and final judgment of God's enemies.*"³ God's judgment is now fully accomplished. Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and the most catastrophic earthquake in history (18). As a consequence the great city split into three parts and the cities of the nations collapsed, even Babylon the Great (19). Every island fled away, and mountains could not be found (20). Huge hailstones from the sky, each weighing 100 pounds, fell on people. This was not just a series of natural disasters but precisely the judgment of God. Even at the last moment of God's horrible judgment, people hardened their hearts and refused to repent. Rather, they cursed God (21).

In this passage we learn why God's judgment is necessary. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. He poured out his wrath on his Son so that we may be saved from our sins. Based on this truth, we should recognize God's marvelous love. However, many people do not accept the love of God and his saving grace in Christ. They love darkness and live as unrepentant rebels who

³ Beale, G.K. and Campbell, David H., *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: Revelation A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), p.352.

reject God's truth and resist his reign. Still, God is compassionate and gracious and slow to anger (Ex 34:6). God does not want anyone to perish but everyone to be saved (2Pe 3:9). Nevertheless, God's final judgment is inevitable because he is holy, righteous, and almighty. If God does not judge, then evil and wickedness will prevail. God would not be the Sovereign Ruler of his creation. God judges according to his own righteous standard as the Creator. In fact, God's judgment is righteous, true and just. So we can trust God. Let us sing the song of the Lamb, "Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty."