

“The End is in Sight” (Revelation 15:1-8)

Last month while I was in Russia, I taught a class on the judgment seat of Christ. This particular class took place on a Tuesday afternoon in 104-degree heat. The seminary classroom was packed with sweaty and smelly male bodies. Visiting professors were required to wear dress shirts and ties. I was in front of the class, teaching away, and because it was so hot, I was about ready to “give up the ghost.” I was nearly praying for the rapture to occur. While I’m teaching the students are practically dropping like flies. They are hurting even more than I am. As I entered the last 30-minute stretch, I said, “I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.” Since I had to use a translator, the dramatic pause before the punch line was beautiful. I then said, “It’s an oncoming train!” I’m not kidding, the class erupted with laughter! You would have thought this was the funniest joke ever told. This one-liner sustained the students and me for the rest of the class.

As we look at Revelation 15, we will be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. However, in this case, it’s not a train; it’s our great and glorious God. Revelation 15 is the shortest chapter in the whole book, just eight verses long. It doesn’t give us any new information of events of the tribulation. Rather, it is a prelude to the last round of judgments that God is going to send upon the earth. It is as though the Lord is warning, “Brace yourself, I have not yet finished judging the wickedness of the earth, there is more to come.” Revelation 15 is an introduction to the beginning of the end!¹ It reminds us that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. In these eight verses, we are encouraged to celebrate God’s work in two ways.

1. Celebrate God’s ultimate victory (15:1-4). In 15:1, John sees² another vision. This time he sees **“another³ sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels⁴ who had seven plagues,⁵ which are the last,⁶ because in them the wrath⁷ of God is finished.”** The word **“sign”** refers to a symbol that is used to signify and teach an important truth. Here, the sign is the seven angels who control seven last plagues.⁸ These plagues refer to the final series of judgments that will come on the Beast, his system, and his worshippers (16:1-21). The sign is called **“great”** because of the awesome power of the judgments. It is called **“marvelous”** because it represents the final vindication of God’s people and His divine judgment against everything evil and wicked. These **“seven plagues”**⁹ complete or finish God’s wrath (15:1-19:5). The verb **“finished”** means “reaches its goal” rather than “comes to an end.” Other expressions of God’s wrath come later (cf. 20:10). During the tribulation period, the judgments (the seals, trumpets, and bowls) are progressive, each worse than the last. However, these last seven judgments, the bowl judgments, are in a category of their very own. They represent God’s final response to the world’s unrepentant wickedness.

The lesson here is: Whenever we fail to repent in answer to God’s initial corrections and judgments, we can be sure that He will escalate our discomfort and hem us in with the purpose of turning us back to Himself. It is an act of His love to protect us from continuing on a course of spiritual self-destruction. But for those who fail to respond to His loving rebukes, He will inevitably pour out His final wrath.

In 15:2, John sees **“something like a sea of glass mixed with fire,¹⁰ and those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God.”** The “sea of glass” was first revealed in 4:6 and functioned as a mirror, reflecting God’s glory and majesty. The sea is also symbolic of God’s purity, holiness, and separation from His creation (cf. Exod 24:10; Ezek 1:22). The sea is **“mixed with fire,”** which suggests the judgment that is about to come. The people standing on this sea are not identified. However, it is likely that they are tribulation martyrs (6:9-11; 7:9-17; 12:11; 14:1-5, 13). These have overcome¹¹ the Beast, his image, and the number of his name (cf. Rev 12:11). The Beast refers to the Antichrist and his political system.

The image of the Beast refers to religious pressure to reject Christ, brought about by the False Prophet. Finally, the number of his name refers to economic pressure to reject Christ.¹²

In a strict sense, these saints did not prevail **“over”** the Beast, for his downfall only comes with the return of Christ, when he will be cast into the lake of fire (19:11-21). These saints are victors literally “from” him (cf. 14:13). The Greek preposition *ek* is used three times in 15:2. The word means “out of, from, away from.” Therefore, a better rendering of 15:2 speaks of the saints being victorious **“from the beast, from his image, and from the number of his name”** (see the NASB side or center column reference). Paradoxical as it may seem, “Christian” victory is often achieved by apparent defeat. We overcome by losing. Those who overcome the Beast are not those who worship him, so as to live, but those who worship God, so as to die. Death is the way to life and to victory. Christ overcame the world by dying to it and so do we. In God’s kingdom it is those who would save their lives who lose them, and those who would lose their lives who save them (cf. Matt 10:38-39).

In 15:2, John also sees these victorious saints **“holding harps of God.”** Only four groups are mentioned as having harps in heaven: living creatures, elders (5:8), heavenly singers (14:2), and these tribulation saints. Harps were not given to all the martyred dead (cf. 7:9-17). The harps have a privileged position before God’s throne. They contribute greatly to the heavenly harmony of the chorus that the redeemed offer to God.¹³

Often those who have been persecuted the most worship the most. Why is this? Typically, it is because these saints arrive at the realization that they have nothing or no one but God. The things of this world pass away. They are seen as fleeting and empty. This explains why often believers in other parts of the world worship with such fervency. The Lord is their life! If you’ve had a tough week and you’re feeling beat up by relationships, work, and the realities of life, be encouraged, the Lord is leading you into a fuller worship experience. He wants you to see Him as your all in all.

John writes that these victors, **“sang the song of¹⁴ Moses,¹⁵ the bond-servant of God, and the¹⁶ song of the Lamb, saying, ‘Great and marvelous¹⁷ are Your works,¹⁸ O Lord God, the Almighty; Righteous and true are Your ways,¹⁹ King of the nations!’”** The Song of Moses was a celebration of God’s miraculous deliverance from the wrath of the angel of death in Egypt, by means of the blood of lambs applied to the doorframes of their houses (Exod 15).²⁰ It was also a celebration of God’s deliverance from the Egyptian army as they passed through the Red Sea and their enemies were swept away. This great deliverance under Moses was a foreshadowing of the great deliverance that was accomplished by the true Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, whose blood must be applied by faith, to the heart of every man and woman who desires to be spared the wrath of God and delivered from His enemies.

What is the song of the Lamb? The Song of the Lamb emphasizes the redemptive work and plan of God in Christ and His promise of deliverance through Christ’s shed blood on the cross (cf. 5:9-10). Both songs, the Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb, are the response of grateful hearts celebrating God’s merciful deliverance.

The first part of this song extols God’s person and His works. This is the recipe for worship. We cannot worship the Lord until we know something about His person and work. I’m often asked to provide letters of recommendation or serve as a reference for people. In order to accurately recommend a person, I need to know the person. I also need to be familiar with his/her accomplishments. Both are necessary. There is a parallel in our relationship with God. We need to know His person and works.

How well do you know God’s person? Have you ever studied the attributes of God? Have you ever read a book on the character of God? A couple of classics come to mind: *“The Knowledge of the Holy”* by A.W. Tozer and *“Knowing God”* by J.I. Packer.

Another book worth purchasing is “*Close to His Majesty*” by David Needham. This book had a great impact on my wife Lori, during our Bible college days. Tony Evans has written an excellent book called “*Our God is Awesome.*” There are many books out there. If you’re interested, I will be glad to recommend others. It is worth reading a book a year on God.

How much time do you spend pondering the great works of God? Psalm 111:2 says, “Great are the works of the LORD; they are studied by all who delight in them.” Do you know what God has accomplished down throughout human history? Have you seen that history is really His-story? Have you shared God’s great works with your children, grandchildren, and fellow believers?

John continues the song in 15:4: “**Who will not fear, O Lord,²¹ and glorify Your name?²² For You alone are holy; for ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU,²³ FOR YOUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS HAVE BEEN REVEALED.**” It is inevitable that everyone fears God and glorifies Him. The rhetorical questions make this crystal clear (cf. 13:4). This will happen after He finishes judging (cf. Ps 86:8-10; Jer 10:7). “The Song of the Lamb” concludes with three reasons for bringing glory to God (note the three-fold repetition of the word “for”). First, God is holy. The word used for “**holy**” (*hosios*)²⁴ is an unusual term that means God is devout or absolutely right in vindicating persecuted believers and judging wicked earth-dwellers. Holiness means that God, by His very nature, demands that sin be punished. God cannot overlook sin. If He did, He would be violating His holiness. Sin must be punished. That’s why Jesus had to die on the cross. It was necessary to punish sin. The only way in which God can be both merciful to sinners and maintain His holiness was for God to punish our sin in Christ.

Have you personally experienced the freedom of having your sins forgiven? Do you have full confidence that you will spend eternity with God? What are you basing that confidence upon? The Bible makes it clear that salvation and assurance only come through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Today, will you trust in person and work of Christ?

The second reason to glorify God’s name is all the nations will come and worship before the Lord. During the tribulation, it will seem that the world is worshipping the Antichrist. He will appear to have succeeded in his mission. Yet this verse points to Rev 21:24-26 when all the nations will come to acknowledge God. In that day, the nations will worship God when Christ returns because He will have purged the earth. No one will say in that day, “Look at man and what man has accomplished.” They will say, “Look at God’s plan for creation. It came to fulfillment just as He promised.”

It is worth mentioning that the phrase “**all the nations**” is the same phrase found in the Great Commission (Matt 28:19; Luke 24:47; cf. Zech 14:16). It expresses the scope of God’s discipleship agenda. Again, God’s plan is so much bigger than you and me. His plan includes every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. Do you share God’s heart? Are you passionate about what He is doing in other parts of the world? Amidst your busy schedule, do you keep yourself informed? I find that my passion for the Lord and His work can decline when I’m not keeping current on His progress throughout the world. Do you have a subscription to mission magazines and newsletters? There are several that have been very helpful to me: Gospel for Asia’s *Send* magazine, Voice of the Martyrs, and Open Doors. These mission agencies will send you a free subscription to various resources with the hope that you will be educated and devoted to prayer. Will you go online today and get on the mailing list of one of these organizations? If you do not have Internet access, will you call our church office and we will be happy to give you contact information? God will change your life as He widens your perspective of His program.

The third reason to glorify God is because His righteous acts have been revealed. This statement is in contrast to the Antichrist’s wickedness. This refers to God’s tribulation judgments in particular.

Of course, this also reminds us of God's many works down throughout history. God has accomplished so much in each of our lives. We must actively recount His many acts. What a powerful song! Let me ask you a very simple question: What is your "song"? What is the preoccupation of your life; the theme of your worship? How is this expressed to God?

[We have seen that we are called to celebrate God's ultimate victory. In 15:5-8, we are also called to...]

2. Celebrate God's final judgments (15:5-8). In 15:5, John writes, "**After these things I looked, and the temple of the tabernacle of testimony in heaven was opened.**"²⁵ The phrase "**after these things I looked**"²⁵ indicates a transition to a new vision and a new subject: the bowl judgments. John saw the heavenly temple opened. Although this is debated, the Bible seems to indicate by this passage and others that there is a literal temple in heaven. Hebrews 8 and 9 seems to argue for the earthly tabernacle being a "copy" of the heavenly (cf. 8:2, 5; 9:23-24). Remember, the point of the tabernacle and temple was to present a Christology for us to see. All the furniture and functions of the temple were a testimony to Christ. The phrase "**the temple of tabernacle of testimony**" refers to the temple as the building that housed God's law, which the earth-dwellers disregard.²⁶ God was now going to hold them to it and judge them by it.

In 15:6, John continues his vision: "**and the seven angels who had the seven plagues came out of the temple, clothed in linen,**²⁷ **clean and bright, and girded around their chests with golden sashes.**" The seven angels now came out from God's presence (cf. 15:1). Each of them had received a plague (judgment) from God (cf. 8:2). Their clean linen garments represent holiness and righteousness (cf. 19:8, 14), and their golden sashes mark them as on a punitive mission (cf. 1:18). Their clothing fits their purpose, which is to purify the earth.²⁸

Our passage concludes in 15:7-8: "**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. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power; and no one was able to enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.**" In 15:7, one of the living creatures (4:6) gave each angel a bowl full of God's wrath.²⁹ Only once elsewhere in the New Testament is this same expression "**golden bowls**" found, and that is in Rev 5:8-9. In chapter 5, the golden bowls are filled with the prayers of the saints, while in chapter 15 they are filled with the wrath of God. The identification of these two sets of golden bowls as the same bowls is not simply the result of the fact that they are described by the same terminology. There is also the parallel of Revelation 8, where the prayers of the saints are mixed with incense, and then with fire, and then cast to the earth in the form of the plagues. It seems evident that God has transformed the prayers of the saints (once contained in the golden bowls) to the plagues of the final series of judgments about to be poured out on the earth (now contained in the same golden bowls). The prayers of the righteous thus become the plagues of Revelation 15 and 16.

Verse 7 includes the important phrase "**who lives forever and ever.**" This ascribes eternity to God. This is a solemn reminder that God, as the eternal One, is first a long-suffering God. For centuries God has withheld his judgment in grace (2 Pet 3:8-9). At this point, not only will God's period of grace be over, but once God pours out His justice in divine wrath it will have eternal ramifications. Through the Lord Jesus Christ man has the opportunity and the means to come to God and be with Him eternally, but if he rejects God's grace in Jesus Christ, he must eternally face God's wrath (14:11).

In 15:8, the temple is filled with smoke. "**Smoke**" frequently represents God's glory and power.³⁰ John tells us that this smoke proceeds from two sources: First, from "**the glory of God.**" The word "**glory**" refers to God's divine essence, righteousness, and justice. Together they form the holiness of God. Second, the smoke proceeds from "**His power.**" The word "**power**" refers to God's inherent and sovereign capacity to execute and carry out the demands of His holy character.

No one could enter God's presence until He had finished judging the earth-dwellers. This indicates the climactic nature of these judgments.³¹ It is also an ongoing reminder that God's glory is always manifested during the time of His judgment.

The end is in sight. Fortunately, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. The Light is the Lord Jesus Christ. In John 12:35-36, Jesus spoke these words to a crowd: “For a little while longer the Light is among you. Walk while you have the Light, so that darkness will not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light.” These things Jesus spoke and He went away and hid Himself from them.”

If you want to be able to celebrate God's ultimate victory and final judgments you must have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Will you step out of the darkness and into the Light?

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Notes

¹ Rev 12-14 prepares us for the final outworking of God's wrath by highlighting the wickedness, which needs to be put aside, and the wicked that need to be punished. Rev 15 draws our attention to the righteous, whose reward is to worship in the presence of God, and whose martyrdom is one of the principle reasons for the wrath, which is to come.

² "Then I saw" (*kai eidon*) again introduces a new scene, this time in heaven (cf. Rev 13:1, 11; 14:1, 6, 14; 15:2, 5).

³ The former "signs" (*semeion*) were the woman and the Dragon (cf. Rev 12:1, 3).

⁴ These angels appear seven times as a group (15:6, 7, 8; 16:1; 17:1; 21:9) and nine times individually (15:2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 17; 17:7; 21:9).

⁵ The seven plagues and seven bowls used in this chapter refer to the same judgments. The use of different terms is designed to display the different aspects and character of these last judgments. They are plague-like calamities, and each is poured out suddenly, all at once as the contents of a bowl when it is turned over.

⁶ We have come to the third and final series of judgments of God upon the earth. In Rev 6 there were the seal judgments. In 8:1-11:13 there were the trumpet judgments. Now, in Rev 15, we come to the final series of judgments, known as the "bowl" judgments. In each series of judgments, the seventh of the sequence blossoms into the seven judgments of the next sequence (cf. 8:1-2; 10:7; 11:15-18). Between the sixth and seventh judgments, there is an intermission, which serves to prepare the reader for what follows. Chapter 7 separates the sixth and seventh seals, and Rev 12-15 separate the sixth trumpet from the beginning of the final series of the seven bowl judgments.

⁷ In the Greek language there are two words used for God's "anger." There is *orge* ("anger"), which emphasizes the divine attitude toward sin as it proceeds from the holiness of God. But then there is *thumos* ("wrath"), which points to the expression of God's anger or God's holiness in action or His wrath overflowing in righteous indignation. Here we have the last and final judgments of the tribulation, but they will also perfectly accomplish God's righteous purposes through this seven-year period. See Hampton Keathley III, *Studies in Revelation* (www.bible.org: Biblical Studies Foundation, 1997), 273.

⁸ There is a good reason why the seven final plagues are introduced in Rev 15:1, but not commenced until 16:1. The literary style of Revelation prepares us for the momentary shift from the scene on earth to that in heaven. The seventh seal commences the trumpet judgments in 8:1, but before the trumpets begin to sound in 8:6 and following, 8:3-5 take the reader into heaven, where the prayers of the martyred saints are added to the incense of the altar and offered up to God. Fire, in turn, is added to the censor by an angel, and it is this fiery mixture, which is cast to the earth. The point of this parenthesis is that the prayers of the saints are transformed into the plagues, which follow. A very similar situation occurs in Rev 15. The seven final plagues are introduced in 15:1, but 15:2-4 forms a parenthesis, so that the seven angels and the seven plagues are not taken up again until 15:5-8. It is not until Rev 16 that the plagues actually commence. Rev 15:2-4 are intended to inform the reader that the presence and the praise of the "victors" are directly related to the judgment, which is soon to follow. The praise and adoration of the "victors" of 15:2-4 is one of the principle causes of the outpouring of the wrath of God, which follows. See Bob Deffinbaugh, *God's Final Word on the Last Times: A Study in the Book of Revelation*, Unpublished Notes.

⁹ This construction (lit. "the seven plagues, the last ones") draws our attention to the fact these are the last of God's judgments of this period and suggests the preceding judgments (seven seals and trumpets) were also plagues.

¹⁰ The "sea of glass" is likely a reference to the laver or bronze bowl [shallow saucer] that the priests used to wash their hands for purification purposes while serving at the altar of the tabernacle or the temple (1 Kgs 7:23). But here, the laver instead of being filled with water it is mixed with fire, which, as a symbol of judgment.

¹¹ "Victorious" (*nikontas*) is the same verb translated "overcome" at the end of each message to the seven churches (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).

¹² See also Kendall H. Easley, *Revelation: HNTC* (Nashville: Holman, 1997), 271.

¹³ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 227.

¹⁴ In the case of both songs, the genitive "of" is probably subjective: Moses and the Lamb were responsible for these songs, not the subjects of them.

¹⁵ The difficulty we face with the song is that the name given it poses a number of problems for the scholars. First, the text seems to suggest that there are actually two songs: "the song of Moses" and "the song of the Lamb" (15:3). This is somewhat troubling in the light of the fact that there is only one rather short song in Rev 15. Secondly, it is difficult to determine which "songs" of the Scriptures can be identified as "the song of Moses," and "the song of the Lamb." The words of this "song" in chapter 15 do not precisely duplicate those of any one song in the Bible. Bible scholars thus disagree as to what former songs this song of the victors is based upon.

¹⁶ The definite article “the” (*ten*) appears before the title of both songs in 15:3, which implies that these are songs known to the reader. If John had written that they sang “a song of Moses,” our dilemma would not exist.

¹⁷ Both “great” and “marvelous” appear elsewhere separately, but only in Rev 15:1 and 3 together. There is an obvious attempt on John’s part to show the connection between the “greatness and marvelousness” of the seven final plagues and the “greatness and marvelousness” of God. This is especially significant in the light of the fact that the unbelieving world marveled at the greatness of the Beast (cf. 14:3-4). No doubt John is saying that the last plagues far outclass the wonders accomplished by the Beast and his prophet, thus manifesting the sovereignty of God and His superiority over men and their meager might.

¹⁸ See Psalm 111:2-3: “Great are the works of the LORD; they are studied by all who delight in them. Splendid and majestic is His work, And His righteousness endures forever.”

¹⁹ See Psalm 145:17: “The LORD is righteous in all His ways and kind in all His deeds.”

²⁰ Moses recorded two songs in praise of God’s faithfulness and deliverance of the Israelites. Of these, the one in Exodus 15 seems slightly more appropriate for these martyrs to echo than the one in Deuteronomy 32 because it is a song of victory. Nevertheless, they both contain similar emphases.

²¹ Luke 12:4-5: “I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!” (cf. Matt 10:28)

²² Exodus 15:11: “Who is like You among the gods, O LORD? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, Awesome in praises, working wonders?”

²³ Psalm 86:9-10: “All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, and they shall glorify Your name. For You are great and do wondrous deeds; You alone are God.”

²⁴ Gk. *hosios* is used in the NT only in Acts 2:27; 13:34-35; 1 Tim 2:8; Tit 1:8; Heb 7:26; Rev 15:4; 16:5.

²⁵ Gk. *meta tauta eidon*, see Rev 4:1; 7:9; 18:1.

²⁶ See Exod 32:15; 38:21; Num 1:50, 53; 10:11; 17:7-8; 18:2; Acts 7:44.

²⁷ The word “linen” (*linon*) is unusual and is not found elsewhere in the NT applied to clothing. John may have in mind the multicolored linen used to make the tabernacle and to make the high priest’s robes (Exod 36:8; 39:2). See Easley, *Revelation*, 274.

²⁸ Clean, shining linen was the standard dress code required in the Holy of Holies and symbolized their purity and righteousness (Ezek 44:17).

²⁹ The priests in Israel’s earthly temple also used bowls in their worship (1 Kgs 7:50; 2 Kgs 12:13; 25:15).

³⁰ Cf. Exod 19:18; 40:34; 1 Kgs 8:10-11; 2 Chron 5:11-14; 7:1-3; Isa 6:4; Ezek 11:23; 44:4.

³¹ Rev 15 is really more of a prelude to Rev 16 than a conclusion to Rev 12-14. Chapters 12-14 record prophetically historical information about the great tribulation but not in the chronological sequence of the three sets of seven judgments (seals, trumpets, and bowls). Chapter 15 is similar to 8:1 in that it prepares for the next set of judgments. It prepares for the resumption of the chronological progression of events on earth that ended temporarily in 11:19.