

The Seven Bowls of Wrath
Rev 15-16, Psalm 79:5-7

Brothers and sisters in Christ - when you're watching a movie where the bad guys get what's coming to them, you have to admit that it feels good and right.

And it doesn't matter what kind of movie it is, a western, a cop-drama, spy thriller, or an epic fantasy - the plot pattern for the dispensing of justice is basically the same...

The bad guys, e.g. the drug dealers, the crime lords, the evil sorcerers, or military dictators end up doing something despicable that personally affects the hero - such as kidnapping the his daughter, wife, girlfriend, or they hurt his dog...

Whatever it is they've done – this time they've gone too far. They've crossed the line with the hero and now it's personal.

And when the hero discovers what they've done... the theme music starts and the hero starts preparing to take vengeance.

He trains, doing pushups, running, lifting weights, sparring, practicing his Kung-Fu etc... and then he's putting on his armor, strapping on his sword and shield, or loading up an assault rifle and holstering several pistols...

And then the camera pans back to show us the hero's face... grim, determined, narrow eyed, steel jawed - bad guys beware – I'm coming for you!

And then the assault begins –the hero attacks, and his fury is unstoppable and he delivers vengeance upon the bad guys and destroys them - they get what they deserved.

Are you familiar with this plot pattern that I've described? If you're not, watch for it the next time you watch an action movie and you'll notice it... in fact you notice that it occurs in almost every action movie.

And friends there are certain patterns that occur in this time between times as well, and Revelation of Jesus Christ helps us to become familiar with, and recognize these patterns.

And we may not have noticed them before - but once we are familiar with them we'll start to notice them occurring in every era that has passed since the first coming of Christ, and we can expect them to continue occurring until Christ returns.

So let's review some of these patterns since in this short August series we've only covered three of the seven visions in Revelation. If you are interested in looking at the remaining four you can find this entire series in the 2013 sermon archives on the church's website.

So the first pattern from the first vision of Christ and the Lampstands. If you look you will notice that over and over again churches are established as lampstands, to shine the light and presence of Christ to the world in the spiritual darkness.

The second pattern you will notice from the second vision of the seven seals is that over and over again churches and their members are subjected to persecution of all kinds – and they must endure the trials and challenges of life to be the light.

Then we have the third pattern from the third vision of the seven trumpets show us that over and over again God sends warning judgments of natural, economic, social disasters, spiritual torment and war, to prompt those who persecute the church to join it instead.

And the fourth pattern from the fourth vision of the dragon and the two beasts reveals that the reoccurring conflict between the Church and Society, or Gov't or Culture, results from the deeper, spiritual conflict which is continually going on between Jesus Christ and his followers and the Devil and his followers.

So the first four visions of Revelation reveal these pattern which occurs and make a pattern in and of themselves. So the church established, the church is persecuted, the world is warned, and there is conflict because of the antagonism of the Devil.

This is a repeating theme that exists in our world history, in our present situation, and it will continue to occur until Christ

returns, and it is in line with what Jesus explained to his disciples as well when He said:

⁶ You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁷ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are the beginning of birth pains. ⁹ "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. ¹⁰ At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, ¹¹ and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. ¹² Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, ¹³ but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved." (Mat 24)

Sounds like a good summary of everything we've covered in the first four visions so far doesn't it... and this reminds us to be ready and prepared, since the only further significant development in this pattern is for Christ to return and bring God's plan for His creation to completion! Amen!

However, this week as we look at the 5th Vision we see there is a deeper understanding of, or another perspective on this reoccurring pattern which is "final judgment" – where, just like in the action movies, the bad guys get what they deserve.

And with the final judgment being introduced at this point in the pattern... the perspective begins to shift.

Prior to this point God has shown Himself to be *slow to anger and abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion*" (Num 14:18) because He has said *"Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?"* (Ez 18:23)

But now we see that God's patience is not indefinite. In the time between times God's wrath is part of the pattern as well and it is poured out again and again in final judgment, which is distinguished from completed judgment – but I'll say more on that in a moment.

In the 5th vision we see there is a line that is crossed by those who continuously ignore the warnings, refuse to see the light of the gospel, align themselves with the Devil and continue to persecute the church.

Brothers and sister in Christ there is a point of no return which can and does arrive before Christ does. This vision reveals that God's wrath does not need to wait until the 2nd coming to be delivered with finality upon those who deserve it.

Now this is a rather sobering and disconcerting message to hear, isn't it!?

Mostly because over the past 50 years in Western Christianity we've been reacting to the "fire and brimstone" turn or burn presentation of the gospel that we've now become as equally but oppositely one-sidedly focused on God's love and forgiveness and patience.

But the balanced scriptural truth we've forgotten is that He will not put up with sin and rebellion indefinitely.

But before we look at the implications of "the final judgment" and how it's distinguished from "completed judgment" as a part of this reoccurring pattern - we need to see why it's included in it in the first place.

Now as we read the 5th vision about the Bowls of Wrath this morning maybe you were thinking – *Why does this sound so familiar? We read about these same judgments last week!*

That's because the Bowls and the Trumpets cover the same territory... if you compare them you can see that.

The 1st bowl is poured out on the land, the 1st trumpet releases hail and fire and blood upon the earth.

The 2nd bowl is poured out on the sea, at the 2nd trumpet something like a huge mountain is thrown into the sea

The 3rd bowl is poured out on upon the rivers and fountains, when the 3rd trumpet is blown the star Wormwood falls on the rivers and springs

The 4th bowl is poured out upon the sun, and the sun and moon and stars are struck when the 4th trumpet is sounded. So far we're tracking pretty good right? Let's keep going.

The 5th bowl is poured out upon the Throne of the Beast and his Kingdom is plunged into darkness, at the 5th Trumpet demonic spiritual torture is unleashed from the abyss and the smoke from the abyss darkens the sky...

When the 6th bowl is poured out – it dries up the water of the Euphrates and demons go out to provoke the Kings of the world to make war against God, when the 6th trumpet is blown there are angels who have been held at the Euphrates who are released to incite the world to war.

Now as we get to the 7th bowl, I want to go back a bit farther than the 7th trumpet and look at the 7th seal...

When the 7th seal was opened there was silence in Heaven for half an hour because the 7th seal opens up into revealing God's final and completed judgment – which is sobering

stuff... it leaves even the angels and the twenty four elders speechless for a half an hour.

So look at how this progresses. The 7th Seal is opened and takes us into the 3rd vision where John sees God responding to the persecution of His people.

The response is symbolized in the Angel hurling the Golden censor down to the earth – as God's judgment is dispensed John records that there are *"flashes of lightning, peals of thunder, and rumblings..."*

Now whenever we read this phrase in Revelation – *"flashes of lightning, peals of thunders, and rumblings"* pay attention because it symbolizes God Almighty speaking or acting...

In fact the very first time John sees God Almighty on the Heavenly Throne he notes *"from the throne there came flashes of lightening, rumblings and peals of thunder"*

So what I'm wanting you notice in this is how the 7th Seal immediately leads us to the judgment of the 3rd Vision being hurled to the earth, accompanied by *"flashes of lighting, peals of thunder, rumblings and an earthquake..."*

And remember that the seven trumpets are really an in-depth look at the different aspects combined in this one action of judgment...

So that when the 7th trumpet sounds – again representing the progress to the final judgment, it helps us to understand the 7 bowls of wrath as different aspects of this final judgement.

And notice again with the 7th trumpet that we see *"flashes of lighting, peals of thunder, rumblings an earthquake"* and in this case *"a great hailstorm"* is added.

So comparing the 7th trumpet now to the 7th Bowl – which is poured out into the air, notice again that there are *"flashes of*

lighting, peals of thunder, rumblings and a severe earthquake - and a great hailstorm"

And to emphasize the distinction that this is no longer a warning trumpet – this is the final judgment the 7th Bowl gives us further descriptions on how complete and devastating the earthquake is *"no earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on the earth" (vs18)* and it describes how massive the hailstones are telling us they were *"about a hundred pounds each" (vs21)*

So, brother and sisters I know this is getting pretty interconnected and maybe hard to track quickly , but if you take away one bit of understand it should be this.

These visions all deal with the same events – warning judgment and final judgment – but from different perspectives... there are not 21 different specific events which the seals, trumpets and bowl represent and must occur in sequence as a fulfilment countdown to the return of Christ and the final judgment.

In actuality the perspective on final judgment that we receive in the 5th vision is that it can come to those who deserve it before Christ returns.

Because the connectedness between the trumpets and the bowls shows us that what is sent as a warning to some, functions as a final judgment for others.

So whenever God – in warning - removes the blessing that we receive from His creation – such as land and sea and sky... or whenever God allows some form of spiritual torment or wars, as we saw happening in the trumpets – for some it will be their final judgment – the bowls of are wrath poured out.

Now when we speak of final judgment occurring for someone before Christ returns, it means that God withdraws any further opportunity for them to repent and seek forgiveness – and many times this occurs because their life has ended.

But final judgment is about more than death finding us before we've decided to turn to Christ. It is noted three times in this

vision that people cursed God because of the plagues of wrath and it says “they refused to repent.”

You see brothers and sisters; the worst possible punishment that we can receive for our sin is to be given over to it completely. In other words any little bit of desire to repent and seek forgiveness is taken away – and God can do that, and that is what we see happening to people through these bowls.

This is what Paul is speaks about in Romans 1: 24, 26 and 28 when he writes “*God gave them over - in the sinful desires of their hearts; to shameful lusts; to a depraved mind.*”

So friends don't be too worried about the struggle with our desire to sin, or perhaps even an increasing desire to sin... It's much more worrisome if are noticing a decreasing sense of conviction and desire to repent and seek forgiveness for sin.

Because that's what happens to those on whom God pours out his bowls of wrath; through these plagues God gives people over to their sinful nature as final judgment.

This is what it means to be damned – and the evidence of is that they curse God and refuse to repent! They have experienced their “final judgment.”

So when Christ returns “like a thief in the night” as this vision predicts - their final judgment will become a completed judgment, that’s the difference between final and completed and the 6th and 7th visions will focus more on the completion.

So given what we’ve learned about final judgment and what we are often tempted with in regards to faith I’m sure we’re all wondering: Is the 5th vision of Revelation telling me about that I’m in a precarious position with God? That I’m in danger of sinning one too many times and crossing that line so that He pours out his wrath upon me and gives me over to my sinful nature so that I do not desire forgiveness or salvation?

Brothers and sisters if we have been sealed by God and Christ is our substitute, and the Holy Spirit is connecting our lives to Christ then we are not in a precarious position of

encountering a damning final judgment like those who bear the mark of the Beast.

And if you remember back to the 3rd vision from last week, John sees the entire church, all those who had been given the seal of God are present in heaven – all 144 000, not 143 999.

And this is the case friends, because to be sealed by God is to have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ as our substitute.

And part of the substitutionary work of Jesus is that he paid for all prior and present covenant unfaithfulness through his sacrifice. Additionally his shed blood initiated a new and unbreakable covenant that covers all the instances of covenant unfaithfulness we will yet commit.

And friends if you need any reassurance that you have been sealed by God in addition to baptism and the Lord’s Supper, ask yourself – are you willing to confess that you’ve sinned

against God and repent and seek forgiveness in Christ for what you've done wrong?

If you are friends then believe the good news, and trust in the work of Jesus Christ and in the grace and mercy of our God – and live by this faith which the Holy Spirit is producing in you and trust that He is sanctifying you.

Because part of that sanctification He needs to work in us may very well be to shake you out of your complacency and malaise with this warning about final judgement.

The Holy Spirit works through these warnings to keep our faith safe by having us turn away from whatever the danger may be. In this case we turn away from complacency or any resistance that we have about confessing our sinful nature.

And this is not “we are worms, we are unworthy” theology – this is realistic, turn to Jesus theology. Remember Jesus said *whoever has been forgiven little, loves little...* (Luke 7:47)

Additionally the way this warning functions for Christians also illustrates how these final judgments function when Christians encounter them.

At the beginning of the 5th Vision John sees a glass, or crystal sea – that is a very large basin... but instead of being filled with water to cleanse, it is mixed with fire – purifying fire. (15:2)

And next to this basin John sees all those who had faced and endured the persecution of the beast - which God had allowed. But note that this experience didn't turn them against God or cause them to curse God.

Instead through these trials they have been purified, and now they are with God in heaven worshiping the Lamb!

So brothers and sisters when we encounter and are affected in some way by “final judgments” as part of the pattern which occurs over and over again in the time between times – sometimes we are spared, e.g. the first bowl, and sometimes we are not e.g. the sixth bowl - for those who are sealed by

God all the calamities, natural disasters, spiritual opposition and wars are used as “final judgment” by God to refine us, to burn away the impurities in us, and further our sanctification.

So our final judgment is working towards our completed judgement, that moment when the scripture says “*we will all be changed*” (1 Cor 15:51) and we will stand before God to give an account of our lives.

But we have nothing to fear in this final or completed judgment because not has Christ saved us from sin, but as Romans 8:28 says “*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*”

What turns some people away from God is used by God to transform us and make us fit to stand before Him. Now we understand why James 1:2 says “*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,*” So what can we say the 5th Vision teaches us about God’s judgment?

I would summarize it this way – that for some it warns them that they need to repent, that for others it removes their desire to repent, but for those sealed in Christ Jesus it works to remove the need to repent!

Because as 1 Thess 5:9 says “*God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

So brothers and sisters let us thank God that final judgement is part of the pattern in the time between times. Let us thank God that He will use it over and over again in our lives, so that we when Christ returns we, his church, have been made ready for Him – His beautiful bride.

So friends receive this blessing, promise and assurance from scripture “*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*” (1 Thess 5:23-24)

Amen!