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1 THE THEME

THE OUTPOURING OF THE SEVEN BOWLS CONTAINING THE SEVEN LAST PLAGUES

2 THE STRUCTURE

a. The victorious over evil (15:1-4)

It describes the victorious people in heaven immediately after the final judgement day.

b. The preparation for the final judgement (15:5-8)

It describes the preparation of the seven angels with the seven bowls containing the final wrath of God.

c. The execution of the final judgement (16:1-21)

It describes the outpouring of God's final wrath on the impenitent people throughout the whole New Testament period, but especially on the final judgement day and the events that immediately precede this.

3 THE CONTENTS

a. The way time is calculated in heaven is different (15:1)

Jesus opens the eyes of John and Christians to see the reality from heaven's point of view (15:1). What Christians still expect to happen on earth in the future is already a present reality in heaven! Christ shows this to John. Everything on earth seems to go on as if God and his reality in heaven do not exist at all. But 'time' is calculated in a different way in heaven than on earth. On earth time is linear chronological: the historic events follow one another in one straight line. But in heaven time is eternal: there the things which we still expect in the future are for ever a reality! In heaven and on earth Christ has already triumphed in death and in resurrection. The historical events on earth are nothing more than the outworking of that triumph of Christ and his truth on earth. In heaven the Christians are already regarded as triumphant! Before the final battle on earth, the Christians already stand triumphant in heaven!

b. Cosmic disasters on earth have significance (16:1-11,17-21)

Disasters strike people either from above (heaven) through means of creation or from below through the lost human culture. The land, the sea and the resources of water had been entrusted to the stewardship of man (Genesis 1:28), but instead had been subjected to man's abuse. Now the land, the sea and the water resources rise up against their abuser. Man had viewed himself as all-powerful, had discovered penicillin, split the atom, built jets and televisions. But now through disasters the same land and sea cast man aside as a dirty cloth.

Earthquakes cause cities to collapse and the final great earthquake will cause the great city to crumble. Babylon is a symbol of the capital of the kingdom of the world from which the evil world with its seductive culture is ruled. It represents all the cities in the world with their seductive cultures. Earthquakes bring an end to seductive cultures.

How do people respond to disasters and how will they continue to respond to disasters? People will gnaw their tongues in agony, but nevertheless curse God because of their pains and sores. They will refuse to repent and refuse to turn to the God of the Bible. They had always regarded themselves as atheists, but now they curse the God they always denied existed! Or they had always believed in a 'god' whom they had devised and defined with their own minds as being on the side of their religion and their way of life. But now they cursed the God of the Bible because he is different than what they had always proclaimed their 'god' to be. One can join any religion without confessing sin and reforming one's life – one only needs to make a certain confession of faith and perform certain religious rituals. But one cannot become a Christian without repentance from sin in all its forms and without transformation of every aspect of life! The God of the Bible is the only God who demands repentance from sin and transformation of the total life. That is why the atheists from secular society, the believers of other religions and even nominal Christians will want to crucify Jesus Christ again (cf. 13:8; Hebrews 6:6). The God of the Bible had not lived up to their expectation of prosperity and health, but has intervened, brought their buildings down and halted their creations.

Finally the kingdom of natural man (the kingdom of the world) goes to war, the final world war (16:12-16). The River Euphrates is the symbolic border that kept the wild and uncivilized nations away from the kingdom of the world. Apparently the kingdom of the world had not controlled every nation and suddenly it became vulnerable. The three frogs coming from the dragon, the antichrist and the false prophet symbolise that these evil forces now act with the help of every available evil force. The kingdom of the world has become completely demonic. It gathers a great army for the final battle – against the Triune God and his Church. And this final world war ends in complete disaster for the kingdom of the world.

c. Cosmic disasters on earth are God's instruments of final judgement

Revelation chapter 15 and 16 belong together. They picture the preparation of the seven angels with the seven bowls containing the seven last plagues of God, the outpouring of these seven bowls on the impenitent people and the song of the Lamb sung by those who have been victorious over the beast. The song of the Lamb (15:2-4) is put at the beginning and represents an event as existing before it actually does. The reason that it is put at the beginning is to show how holy and just God's judgements are before they are actually poured out.

The seven bowls with the seven last (final) plagues that are poured out are a symbol of *God's final and eventually his complete wrath* in his judgements. God uses every department of the universe to punish the wicked and impenitent and persecutors of his people. Whoever refuses to be warned by God's initial and partial trumpet judgements (chapters 8 to 11) receive the full execution of God's final and complete bowl judgements (chapters 15 to 16). For one individual in the course of history a certain calamity may be God's trumpet judgement (a warning to repent); while for someone else that same event may be God's bowl judgement (his final judgement). For example, the flood was a trumpet judgement for Noah and his family, but a bowl judgement for the rest of the world (2 Peter 2:5). The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was a trumpet judgement for Job and his family, but a bowl judgement for the rest of the citizens of those cities (2 Peter 2:6-10). The disease, which hurled king Herod Agrippa I into hell, served as a warning to other readers of the book Acts (Acts 12:21-24).

At times the land calamities, sea calamities, river and spring calamities and sun calamities are used as *instruments of God's judgement* against the people who bear the mark of the beast and worship the beast. At other times God's wrath is poured out on the throne of the beast himself or on the battles of the beast and his allies against the Church.

But the very last, very final and thereby also complete execution of God's judgement will take place on *the final judgement day*. With the outpouring of these bowl judgements of God, God's wrath against the godless and wicked world as a whole (Romans 1:18) reaches its climax, is completely spent and is completely satisfied.

At the throne of judgement God in Christ will not for the first time weigh peoples' sins and then determine whether they would be saved or doomed. All people are already judged during their lives on earth. Before they physically die they are already justified or doomed (condemned). At their physical death they have already been credited with Christ's righteousness through their faith during their lives or they have already been doomed because of their own sins and unbelief (John 3:18). On the final judgement day God will only publicly pronounce their righteousness or their damnation and assign them to his eternal kingdom or to eternal hell (Matthew 25:31-48; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:11-15). After this, God's love rests eternally on the righteous (Romans 8:37-39) and God's wrath rests eternally on his enemies (John 3:36).

d. The four differences between the seven bowls and the seven trumpets

The bowls containing the last plagues remind of the warning trumpets (8:7 to 9:21; 11:15). However, the seven bowls are not a simple repetition of the seven trumpets. There are four differences between the seven bowls and the seven trumpets:

The target is different. While God's trumpet judgements strike *believers as well as unbelievers*, his bowl judgements strike *only unbelievers*. Only at the sounding of the fifth trumpet it is said that its judgement (torture by demons) would not strike believers, that is, those people who had the seal of God on their foreheads (9:4). In contrast, already at the outpouring of the first bowl it is said that its judgement would strike the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image (16:2).

The number is different. While the trumpet judgements are limited to striking *a third* of the earth, sea, rivers and sun, the bowl judgements would strike *the whole* earth, sea, rivers and sun.

The intensity is different. Insofar the disasters may be compared we notice that the disasters of the bowl judgements are more awful than the disasters of the trumpet judgements: with the trumpet judgement the sun only darkens (8:12), but with the bowl judgement the sun scorches with fire (16:8-9).

The time is different. The trumpet judgements and bowl judgements are executed *throughout world history*, but the bowl judgements are executed at the end of someone's life on earth and especially *during the end of world history*.

4 THE BACKGROUND

a. The number seven (15:1)

Seven is the number of divine perfection and completeness. In the Old Testament, when people hardened their hearts and persisted in disobedience to God, he punished them for their sins seven times over (Leviticus 26:14-35).

b. The tabernacle (15:5)

The tabernacle of the Testimony in the Old Testament was the Most Holy Place in the tent and later the temple that contained the ark with the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments written on it (Exodus 25:16,21; 38:21; Hebrews 9:4).

The tabernacle of the Testimony in the New Testament is heaven itself from where Christ descended at his first coming and where he now functions as Mediator (Hebrews 9:11,24).

c. The plagues or disasters of Egypt

The bowls containing the last plagues remind of the Egyptian plagues (Exodus chapters 7-10). Israel was a type and the beginning of the Lord's Community (the Church)¹ and Egypt and Pharaoh were types of the antichristian world power and antichrist in their war against the Lord's Community (Ezekiel 29:3).

¹ Israel is called the Church (ἐκκλησία) in the Old Testament (Judges 20:2; Psalm 22:22; 2 Chronicles 29:28)

In the Old Testament the salvation of the people of God out of Egypt is *the beginning of the salvation* of the Church out of the power of Satan and the antichristian world and a picture of salvation of the Church in the New Testament. The Egyptian plagues *foreshadow* (cf. Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 8:5; 10:1) God's punishment of the godless and wicked world together with their governing authorities (the antichrist and his kingdom). The entrance of Israel into the rest (the Promised Land) and the fact that a Sabbath-rest remains for the people of God in the New Testament period (Hebrews 4:1-11) is a picture of *the end (completion) of the salvation* of the Church when they enter the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:1-2).

d. The river Euphrates (16:12)

In the Old Testament the river Euphrates formed the border of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:14). It also formed the border of the Promised Land (Genesis 15:18; 2 Samuel 8:3). The nations living beyond the Wadi of Egypt (Egyptians) and the river Euphrates (Babylonians) were regarded as the enemies of God's people (2 Kings 24:7). Thus, the river Euphrates was regarded as the dividing line between God's people living in the Promised Land and the unknown inimical powers living outside it.

In the New Testament the river Euphrates is still regarded as the dividing line between the Church and the kingdom of the world (16:12).

e. Megiddo (16:16)

In the Old Testament Megiddo was the place where God defeated the enemies of Israel (the Old Testament Church) when Israel was severely oppressed (Judges 5:19-20).

In the New Testament Megiddo is the symbolic place where God will defeat the enemies of the New Testament Church in the final battle in history (16:16).

f. Babylon the Great (16:19)

In the Old Testament Babylon was the *symbol* of the godless and wicked civilisation of the world (Isaiah 47:12-13), just as the heavenly Jerusalem is the symbol of the believing and righteous community of God (Isaiah 54:10-14; Galatians 4:26-27).

In the New Testament, Babylon continues to be the *symbol* of the godless and wicked civilisation of the world. It is a symbol of Satan's *antichristian world and its seductions*, especially in industry and commerce, business and finance, education and justice, luxuries and pleasures, art and sports, etc. (cf. 18:2-3,20,22). In short, it is a symbol of Satan's *antichristian culture* connected to the world empires throughout the period from Christ's first coming to Christ's second coming.