

“The Glory of God”
Revelation 15:1-8
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We have completed the interlude between the sounding of the seven trumpets and the pouring out of the seven bowls of God’s wrath. Chapter 15, the shortest in the book of Revelation, is the introduction to this last of the three series of seven in the central part of Revelation: the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls.

Text Comment

- v.1 15:1 is a superscription or title for the entire following section that continues to the end of chapter 16.

To refer to the judgments as plagues reminds us of the plagues of Egypt, there as here, at one and the same time a sign to the world of God’s power in judgment and to God’s people of his mercy and deliverance. [Osborne, 561] As we will see, there are a number of Exodus parallels in the following verses. To refer to them as *the last* plagues indicates that the bowls will take us up to the Last Judgment (as many have suggested was done as well by the seals and the trumpets). These plagues are anticipations of eternal judgment and have for their purpose not only to punish wickedness but to drive men to repentance. The seven bowls complete God’s warnings to an impenitent world. As we will read in 16:8, at least in general they will not succeed in producing repentance.

In chapter 12 both the woman and the dragon were called “signs.” That is, “they point beyond themselves and disclose the...meaning of history.” [Mounts, 285]

- v.4 As before, when John was about to describe the judgments of the Lord descending upon the earth, he gave us to see the triumphant saints already in heaven. The darkness and grimness of the world situation, especially for the saints of God, must not blind us to the eventual victory. John sees the saints who had resisted the beast, who had refused to succumb to his threats or take upon themselves his mark, and, even under terrible persecution, had refused to compromise their faith in Jesus Christ. They are now triumphant in heaven. This company is the same as the 144,000 of 14:1-5 and of 7:4-10. In both of those texts also the company of saints is singing praise to God and in chapter 14 they are playing their harps. [Caird, 197-198] The sea of glass before the throne of God was mentioned in 4:6.

The song they sing is described as a song both of Moses and the Lamb and is similar to many such songs of praise in the Old Testament and especially the two songs of Moses in Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32. Virtually every phrase of this song is drawn from some OT precedent. In fact, one commentator describes it as “a cento of quotations from many parts of the Old Testament.” [Caird, 198] A cento, you may remember, is a literary patchwork, composed of parts taken from various places and placed together to make a new work. We are reminded in this way of how the faith of the saints has been the same

from the beginning. As Jesus made a point of saying and as Paul often argued, Moses' faith *was* the faith of the New Testament believer and vice versa. Saints before and after the incarnation worshipped the same God and gave glory to him for the same salvation.

Again, as so often throughout the Bible, the vision of the future includes a picture of the nations streaming to the city of God to worship God their Savior. The idea is, of course, not that all human beings will be saved – Revelation has still much to say about the judgment of the unrepentant – but that God's salvation will reach every tongue and tribe and nation and so much so that there is a sense in which we may speak of the *world's* salvation.

- v.5 The sight of the tabernacle, rather than the temple in John's vision, seems to be due to all the exodus imagery in chapters 15 and 16. The plagues, for example, recall the plagues of Egypt; so does the song of Moses, and so on. The entire section recalls the time of the tabernacle, not the temple. For that matter, we Christians are in the wilderness; not yet in the Promised Land.
- v.7 The description is intended to emphasize the great glory of these heavenly beings as well as the purity of their work. They have come from God to execute his judgment upon the earth. They receive the bowls from one of the four chief angels who are before the throne of God.
- v.8 In the Old Testament, as you will remember, when God manifested himself to his people his glory was more than they could bear. When the tabernacle and later the temple were consecrated the glory of the Lord filled those sanctuaries with a cloud of smoke and men could not enter it. When Isaiah was given his vision of God we read in Isa. 6 that the foundations of the temple shook, the sanctuary was filled with smoke, and Isaiah fell on his face before the glory of the Lord. These are visible demonstrations of the majesty of God, his unapproachableness, his otherness or transcendence, and of the vast distance that separates God from man.

The first time I visited Europe was May of 1972. Two college classmates and I conceived of the trip as a graduation present to ourselves. We graduated Saturday morning and drove that afternoon and through the night to reach New York City to catch our flight to Luxembourg. No sleep but lots of cheerful anticipation. The flight was uneventful and we found ourselves in Europe Monday afternoon, tired but eager, having slept fitfully as one can on an airplane. We discovered, however, that our plans to rent a car in Luxembourg – ours was to be an auto-tour of the countries of Western Europe – had to be changed. I can't now remember why. We decided to take the train to Paris, which was in any case to be our first stop, and get our rental car there instead. We were novices and did not anticipate problems. The train arrived in Paris just as everything was closing for the night. We had no French money, no way of locating a youth hostel... what to do? A passerby told us that we could change money at an all-night drug store on the Champs Élysées and so I was deputed to make the trip and secure enough francs for a night in a cheap hotel. My friends were to remain at the station with our luggage. We found a cab driver who would take dollars and away I went but when I got to the drug store I discovered that before they could change my money they required a considerable purchase. We couldn't afford

to waste that much money on the very first night of our trip so I returned to the train station only to find that my two buddies were nowhere to be found, the station was locked, and everyone had disappeared. It was now well past midnight; I had no luggage; I was separated from my friends; and I was cold. I spent a few hours sitting on the table of a sidewalk café, now closed, across the street from the station, hoping my friends would return but finally it was clear that wherever they were they were not coming back and it was too cold to stay outside all night long. I spent the remaining hours of darkness sitting in a French bar nursing a beer (I hate beer but it was all I knew to order). I hadn't slept for forty-eight hours, I was afraid for my friends, and I was sitting among the sort of people who spend the night drinking.

At 6:00 a.m. the train station gates were unlocked and I walked in to see if I could learn anything of my friends. A few minutes later they walked out of a hallway, glassy-eyed. They had been locked by the police into a large room in the station, filled with drunks and derelicts, and had spent the night wide awake for fear of being robbed or assaulted. We were all now well past forty-eight hours with virtually no sleep. We were thoroughly exasperated, discouraged, and exhausted. When the banks opened, we got some money, got to the car rental office, got our car, and left Paris shaking the dust of our feet off against it. City of Lights? You've got to be kidding! Our trip was off to such a miserable beginning that, I think, had someone walked up to us and offered tickets home, we would have grabbed them and ran for the airport.

But, in the Lord's kindness, the first stop on our itinerary happened to be the cathedral town of Chartres, some miles west of Paris. Some of you have been there and can understand what I am about to tell you. We found our way to the cathedral, in the middle of that ancient town, walked into the vastness of that magnificent nave, and all the exhaustion, all the disappointment, all the fear of what we had got ourselves into, immediately vanished. The load on our hearts lifted and we found ourselves simply overwhelmed with the beauty and grandeur and majesty of that great house of worship. We spent hours there, our weariness forgotten, listening to the guide explain the great window at the end of the nave, climbing the towers, and basking in the atmosphere of that place. Chartres transformed our trip. In the car, alone with our thoughts, we had been wondering if we had made a terrible mistake. A few moments later we were not only overjoyed to be there but were looking forward to all the rest that we would see and experience over the next six weeks.

Well, it is something like that of which we read here in Revelation 15. What we have here is the overturning of weariness, sadness, confusion, and fear in the breaking in of final victory and triumph for the saints of God. We see what their faith has got them now that they are in heaven. We hear them joyfully and lustily praising God. Life for the earnest Christian in the Devil's world *had been* confusing, frustrating, disappointing, wearying, dispiriting. Throughout the book John has been preparing his readers for this. They have already faced difficulties and things were bound to get worse. They were in the midst of a great battle. You have seen photographs of soldiers during and after a battle: grimy, disheveled, faces wan, eyes dark and sunken, exhausted; and these are often the soldiers *who won* the battle! The losers lie face down in the mud or are tramping off to captivity in despair.

But, then, suddenly, there is the sea of glass mixed with fire; there are the four living creatures and the angels, and, above and beyond them there is the glory of God. The air is no longer foul

and fetid but perfectly pure and fresh, one feels the vital energy of eternity in one's self, new life full of goodness pulses in the soul. And suddenly the wounds and the weariness of battle are forgotten, a song rises in the heart and stirs the voice, and each faithful believer, his struggle behind him, finds himself among a great company singing for joy, lost in wonder, love, and praise. It is this prospect that is set before us once again before we begin to read of the outpouring of the wrath of God, bowl after bowl, in chapter 16. God will not leave the wicked and rebellious world to prosper. His judgments will fall upon it. They are his megaphone to arrest the rebellion of man before it is too late, before the day of salvation draws to its end. Christians live in that world upon which the judgments will fall. They will be caught up in the trouble. As man's rebellion grows in fury, as he turns against God's children because he cannot reach God himself, life for the believer will become increasingly hard and difficult. But hang on, brothers and sisters, don't despair, *heaven and the glory of God await*.

Now, I want you to put a question to yourself and to answer it honestly. Does this prospect – seeing the glory of God and lifting your heart in the praise of his glorious name – does this prospect lift you up? Does it galvanize you? Does it strengthen and embolden you to fight the good fight while you are here in this world, to take comfort in sharing in your Savior's sufferings while you are here; does it make you want to prove yourself faithful as long as you are in this world. With *that* ahead of you, do you find yourself nerved and steeled for the battle?

I'm sure that for many Christians it is not so or at least not very much so. We may very well know that it *ought to be* so, but the anticipation of beholding and basking in the glory of God does not thrill us all that much. When we are struggling to surmount our temptations, when we face the prospect of suffering in some way for our loyalty to Jesus we do not immediately think of the glory of God that awaits us and take hope from that prospect. As C.S. Lewis famously put it, our spiritual taste buds are like a crocodile's back. We have difficulty realizing the wonder that lies before us. Our problem with desire is not – as we ordinarily think of it – that our desires are too strong, but that they are too weak. We fool around with sex and drink and ambition when an infinite joy is offered us, “like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.” [*Weight of Glory*, 1-2]

Is that not our problem, yours and mine? When the Bible holds up before us the prospect of actually sharing in the divine nature and of glorying in the majesty of God we fear that heaven will be dull because there won't be romance or sexual love or marriage or family or, perhaps, some of the other pleasures of this world. The differences we imagine between heaven and earth are, in our thinking, in some important ways to heaven's disadvantage! But think with me for a moment about that.

Who gave us these desires that are so powerful in us and which draw our longing after them? Was it not God himself? He made us to desire sexual fulfillment. He made us to love good food. He made us to find joy in listening to music or in looking at beautiful things. He made us to desire the love of others and to find great fulfillment and pleasure in giving love to others. God made us for this. He worked those desires into our nature, he worked their fulfillment into the life of the world, and he gave us great pleasure in that fulfillment. All of that is from him.

Can any reasonable person, still less any Christian, believe that a God who knows pleasure and fulfillment so perfectly, knows how to create the desire for it and knows how to satisfy those desires; I say, can anyone say that in a perfect world, a world where God's love and presence and power are no longer restricted or qualified in any way, there will be *less* fulfillment, *less* satisfaction, or *less* pleasure? Such a thing is inconceivable.

And is it not true, is it not obviously and painfully true, that none of the desires for happiness and goodness and fulfillment that we have and cannot escape, none is ever really satisfied in this world? Take the happiest, most loving marriage in the world. There is an ecstasy of love from time to time, but only from time to time. The husband and the wife will tell you that though they never stop loving one another they are often distracted by other things, they often are weary and bowed down by life, they often do not rejoice in one another as sometimes they do. What would life be like if one were always as happy as one sometimes is?

That delicious experience of the soul when it is first in love; that first bite of food that is more delicious than you thought food could ever be (I always thought I knew what ice cream was supposed to taste like until several years ago I had a gelato in Sorrento, Italy. Oh! So *this* is ice cream!); that first sight of something so beautiful that it took your breath away: none of those experiences can be the norm in this world; none is. But why do they exist at all except to prove that the things we long for actually do exist, the joys we crave do exist, and the fulfillment of life that we have grasped for, that also exists. We simply can't have anything but the taste of them and the anticipation of them in this fallen world, but that they exist there is no doubt.

And think of one of the experiences we have in this world – my experience at Chartres – but which we have perhaps most rarely of all the great and wonderful experiences of life. I am speaking of the experience of being awestruck, of being overwhelmed by the greatness of something splendid and beautiful and surpassingly good.

Some of you will recognize the name Avery Dulles, the late Roman Catholic Cardinal and theologian, a conservative defender of the faith against the liberalizing elements unleashed by the second Vatican Council. Dulles, the son of John Foster Dulles, secretary of state in the Eisenhower administration, was raised in a liberal Presbyterian home but had given up the faith by the time he left home to study at Yale. His doubts about God and religion remained in place until suddenly, one day during his university years, walking by the Charles River, something happened to him.

As I wandered aimlessly, something impelled me to look contemplatively at a young tree. On its frail, supple branches were young buds attending eagerly the spring which was at hand. While my eye rested on them the thought came to me suddenly, with all the strength and novelty of a revelation, that these little buds in their innocence and meekness followed a rule, a law of which I as yet knew nothing. How could it be, I asked, that this delicate tree sprang up and developed and that all the enormous complexity of its cellular operations combined together to make it grow erectly and bring forth leaves and blossoms? The answer, the trite answer of the schools, was new to me: that its actions were ordered to an end by the only power capable of adapting means to ends, intelligence – and that the very fact that this intelligence worked toward an end implied [purpose] – in

other words, a will. It was useless, then, to dismiss these phenomena by obscurantist talk about a mysterious force of "Nature." The "nature" which was responsible for these events was distinguished by the possession of intellect and will, and intellect plus will makes personality. Mind, then, not matter, was the origin of all things. Or rather not so much the "mind" of [the Greek philosophers] as a Person of Whom I had had no previous intuition.

Dulles said, after that moment he never again "doubted the existence of an all-good and omnipotent God." What had happened? What so suddenly banished his gloomy doubts? Dulles had caught a glimpse, just a glimpse of the glory of God. And that glimpse transformed his life. He was awestruck at the sight of something God had made and that realization of wonder had led him back in his thoughts inexorably to the Creator himself, all goodness, power, and light. He was dumbstruck before God. Every man and every woman has the opportunity to be overwhelmed by the glory of God every day, to be elated by it, carried away by it, but in most cases our sinful minds remain blind to it and our hard hearts refuse to rejoice in it.

When we think of our desires we are certainly right to think that they point to reality. It would be very strange if men and women were to have sexual desires in a sexless world; or to have a desire for food in a world in which their bodies were nourished by some other means; or if they were to long for love in a world without relationships. And, in the same way, it would be very strange if men and women had the capacity to be awestruck, electrified, dazzled, amazed, and ravished if there was not that which could utterly overwhelm them. But we are also right to admit that no experience that we have had in this world fully answers to our capacities. We know very well that we can love more than we have ever loved; that we can be happier than we have ever been; and that we can be more awestruck, more dumbstruck than anything in this world has caused us to be.

What else, who else could be so great that he would drink up all of our capacities for awe, for love, for satisfaction, for fulfillment into himself and satisfy them all and fill us completely but God? Wise men have always understood this. However difficult they may have found it to rest their desires in and upon God, they knew that every human longing, every true and worthy desire, every experience of love, beauty, and goodness would be utterly transcended by that first sight of the divine glory and by living in the immediate presence of God himself.

So David, the man after God's own heart, prayed:

"One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple." [Ps. 27:4]

That was just David's way of saying that he couldn't wait to be standing before the sea of glass mixed with fire, among a great host of fellow believers, singing glory to God in the highest! He knew that no happiness that he had ever experienced in this life – and David had many powerful experiences of joy and satisfaction – would ever begin to compare with *that*.

Augustine said a similar thing when, at the beginning of his *Confessions* he wrote his famous sentence as a thesis for the entire work: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” That was Augustine’s way of saying that nothing will ever fully satisfy us or fill our hearts with joy or give us the true experience of perfect wholeness until we are one with God in heaven. We have been made for God and all the desires and longings of our heart will find their truest consummation only when we are with God entirely, immediately, and visibly. Wonderful as so much is in this world – the love of man and woman; the love of parents and children; friendship; the satisfaction of accomplishment; the appreciation of beautiful things; indeed, the love of God in our hearts – I say, as wonderful as all of this is, it is but the anticipation of something far greater, a delight so far beyond our knowing that the Bible has to describe it to us in images and figures of speech.

When the bowls begin to be poured out, when the beast begins to do his worst, when the world becomes the difficult place it often can be for a believing man or woman, you remember *that!* You imagine yourself standing beside the sea of glass mixed with fire; among the great company; standing before the glory of God; and hearing the swell of that great chorus beginning to sing.

“Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty!”