

Revelation chapter 15 is probably best described as a preparation for what is to come. Because in the next chapter, in Revelation chapter 16, we will see the final series of judgments in the book. It will be the final outpouring of the wrath of God. And the chapters after that will show the final defeat of all evil. So chapter 15, then, is preparing us for all that is to come by giving us two different pictures: one of the angels who will carry out that judgment, and the other of the saints who are giving glory to God for all that he has done and for all that he is going to do.

So John in this chapter sees what he calls, first of all, "a sign in heaven, great and amazing." And there's been only one other vision in the book of Revelation so far that was described in that way. And that came in chapter 12 with the vision of the dragon and the woman. And since we saw at that time just how important that chapter is for understanding the entire book of Revelation, it also shows us how important this chapter and the chapters after it are as well. Because we see here a vision of seven angels carrying seven plagues. These angels have been sent to carry out the judgment of God. And with them, as John says, the wrath of God is finished. These angels are a picture of the Last Day, when God will bring an end to all evil, and it will be the beginning of eternity, which shows us why this is so important.

But John tells us a little bit more about these angels in the second half of this chapter. He says in verses 5 and 6: "After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests." And so as we heard in the previous chapter, the sanctuary in heaven is where God is. It's a picture of his presence there. And for these angels to come out of the sanctuary shows that they have been sent from God. They are the instruments of his wrath. And notice how they're dressed here. John describes them as being dressed in bright linen with golden sashes around their chests. Jesus in Revelation chapter 1 is described in a similar way. Revelation 1:13 says that "in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest." In other words, these angels look like Jesus. Now, they're not God. We should not understand them as God. But they look like God, which again just emphasizes their mission. They have been sent to carry out God's will.

And John tells us that one of the living creatures, one of the four angels around the throne of God, gives to these angels golden bowls. We should not think of these as being like our soup bowls, the kind of thing that we would use at the kitchen table. The bowls that John is talking about here are much larger and generally a lot flatter. They were used in worship when you would fill them up with things like wine that you would then pour out in sacrifice. Think of something like a large mixing bowl, but with a lot shorter sides, and you'd have a much clearer idea of what they look like. But these bowls have been filled with the wine of God's wrath. The cup of wrath has been emptied out into them. When they are poured out, there will be nothing left. The pouring out of these bowls will be the end of judgment. It will be the end of all evil. And the angels are now standing there with these bowls in their hands, waiting for the command to pour them out.

And we are also told that when the angels went out of the sanctuary that smoke fills the entire space. And this smoke is a picture of God's glory, so that no one is able to enter into the sanctuary, not even the angels. You see this happen also in the Old Testament. For example, when the tabernacle was first built, the glory of the Lord filled it. And we're told in Exodus 40 that Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory

of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Not even Moses, Moses who spoke to God, Moses who knew him face-to-face, Moses who spoke to him like a friend, not even Moses was able to enter in when God's glory settled on the tabernacle. We see this also with the first temple when it was finished. 1 Kings chapter 8 says that "the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord." And so in the Old Testament, this always showed the presence of God. It showed that his glory had come near, that no one would be able to approach him.

But here in Revelation, we're told that this happens until the seven bowls have been poured out, until these judgments have taken place. So it's not just God's glory that's going on here. God is effectively closing off the tabernacle. God is denying access until this judgment has been carried out. There will be no intercession. There will be no interruption. Nothing is going to stop what is to come. God will pour out his wrath finally and fully and completely.

So yes, Christians, all of this is a great and amazing sign, that is to say, something that can cause us to feel terrified. Because who would not tremble before the Lord appearing in all of his wrath? God is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him!

But it's important to remember that the book of Revelation is not meant to scare us. The same is true here. This is meant to strengthen us, and it is meant to comfort us. And so it's important also to look at that other vision that John sees, the one that comes in the middle of this chapter, because that vision will help us to understand the other. It will help us to prepare for what is to come. And this is what John says in verse 2: "And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands." And so John sees, first of all, what he describes as being like a sea made of glass. In other words, it is water that is so perfectly still that there is no wave, not even a ripple on it. It's just completely smooth, like a mirror. We saw this sea earlier in the book of Revelation when it appeared before the throne of God in Revelation chapter 4. And then, just as now, this sea is a representation of the complete and perfect control of God. Because the sea is a terrifying place, Christians. It is a place that is unstable, a place that is constantly moving, a place that is constantly shifting. It is a place of wind and waves, of storms and shipwrecks. But God has control even over the sea. God's power is not limited. He can make the waves be still. And that's what we see happening here.

But this glassy sea is also described as being mixed with fire. Fire in the book of Revelation is a symbol of judgment. We'll see this in the chapters ahead when we see the lake of fire. But we've also seen it before with fire coming down from heaven in some of God's judgments. So what we have here is a mixed picture of water that is perfectly still and of the fire of judgment, which shows what it means for God to judge the world. Because God's wrath does not mean that he's somehow out of control, Christians, like he's just raging beyond all measure. And God's wrath does not mean that he's trying to regain control, that everything has gone wrong and he's just struggling to make it go right again. No, God is not struggling. God's judgment is perfect. God's wrath is a perfect judgment. And nothing can be done to avoid it. God is going to do what is right, and he will make all things right in the end.

But next to the sea with the harps of God in their hands, we see the saints standing there. And that points us back again to the Old Testament, where we see God's people standing beside a

different sea, the Red Sea. In the book of Exodus, God had split the Red Sea, so that Israel was able to pass through. And when the Egyptians tried to pursue them, when they tried to go through the sea too, God brought the waters back over them, and the Egyptian army was destroyed. God's judgment on that day, Christians, was perfect and complete. God had repaid Pharaoh for all the evil that he had done to his people. And the Egyptians would never be able to take Israel back again.

And there on the shore of the Red Sea with the Egyptians dead, Moses and the people of Israel sang a song of praise to the Lord, the Song of Moses, which we recited together this evening. Exodus 15, verse 1, says: "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea." And here God's people are singing that song again. They are singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb. They are praising God for his judgments, praising God for pouring out his wrath on his enemies, just like Israel did on the shores of the Red Sea all those years ago.

And Christians, I ask you, can we give thanks for God's wrath? Can we give thanks for his judgments? It should not feel odd for us to do so. Because God's wrath means that he does what is right. It means that he does what is good. There's nothing more that needs to be done. There's nothing that could be done to improve it. God's wrath upon sin is a good thing, and it is worthy of praise. If it does feel strange to us, it may be because of a misplaced pity, thinking that God should've done something else or that God was somehow being cruel when he poured out his judgments. We should give thanks for what God has done, because God repays evil with what it deserves. And nothing will be able to escape the justice of God! And think about what that means for us, Christians. It means that every cold case in this world, where it seems like no one is ever going to come to justice, it means that every injustice in this world, when someone is punished wrongly for something that someone else did, it means that everything that we suffer as Christians at the hands of the world, it means that everyone who sets themselves above the law, thinking that they can do whatever they please, it means that those who abuse power, who use it for their own sinful gain, it means that every hidden sin, things that will never be known in this lifetime, all of it will be made right on the Last Day. God will set all things right in his righteousness and in his justice. And above all, Christians, it means that he will give justice to his own people. Every tear will be wiped away. Every sin will be repaid. Everything bad will come untrue. So why should we not give thanks for what God has done? Why should we not sing like Israel did standing on the shores of the Red Sea, rejoicing over the destruction of God's enemies? God's justice is perfect. God's justice is true. God's justice is righteous. And it is right to glorify him for it.

And so Christians, while we wait for that day when God will bring perfect justice forever, let us call on him to bring justice also now, not the faulty, imperfect justice of this world, not the things that the world thinks are right, but the true and the eternal justice of heaven. Because all of his ways are just and true. He will not leave any sin unpunished. Our righteous God will make all things right, and that is something that we should give thanks for!

Let us pray. O Lord God the Almighty, who alone is holy and whose ways are just and true, bring justice to your people everywhere, and bring an end to sin, so that we may stand before you in righteousness forever. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.