

lesson eleven

MARCH 9–15

The Seven Last Plagues

“Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, for Your judgments have been manifested” (Revelation 15:4, NKJV).



While there may be troubling events happening around us, we can remain calm knowing that God is in control.

Rev. 15:4 | **Introduction**
*Pausing to Praise
in the Plaguelands*

Welcome to the “Plaguelands” of Revelation 15 and 16. What makes the Plagueland chapters so strange is how they challenge and defy our imagination. Surely, when God sends the seven last plagues, He will finally let heaven’s special effects team loose, right? We expect explosions. We expect asteroid artillery.

God is done with evil.

What we find in the Plaguelands is so different. Those looking for zombies or post-apocalyptic wastelands will have to wait for Revelation 20 because everything about the seven last plagues is wrapped in the imagery of worship. And that seems totally out of place.

The plague-bearing angels come from the holiest of holies in the heavenly temple—God’s very presence (Rev. 15:5, 6). They wear white, priestly clothes. The temple is filled with the glory of God while the redeemed praise God’s “righteous acts” and ask: “Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name?” (verse 4, NIV). After the third angel turns the rivers to blood, he, too, pauses to praise God: “You are just in these judgments” (Rev. 16:5, NIV).

The strange thing about these plagues is that there’s actually more praising than plaguing going on here. How is it that earth’s darkest moment shines so bright and holy in heaven?

If I were writing this scene, I’d have God quietly kick the angels out of heaven, saying something about needing to be alone right now. He would dim the lights before facing His rebellious children below. The whole wayward story of woe would be summed up in a single tear that ran down His face. Then, and only then, would He stretch out His hand. Yet, before He can summon the word of death, He would have to look away. This was never part of the plan.

That’s how I would have written the scene: a solemn, strange, reluctant justice. Never would I have imagined this as a moment of worship. That the angels are singing while the world is burning seems to feed the prejudice of Christianity’s critics.

Yet look more closely at this worship: the angels praise God because the justice so long prayed for has finally come. The angel of the bloody waters says God is just because “they have shed the blood of your holy people and your prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve” (verse 6, NIV). These plagues represent the end of God’s longsuffering with sin. No more will He tolerate murder. No more will He have to watch His children being raped, disfigured, or killed by drunk drivers. These lonely centuries have been spent in blood. However one interprets the plagues (literally or figuratively), the goal of the plagues is clear: God is done with evil.

Logos
*God's Wrath:
The Pain of Searing Loss*

Revelation 15; 16

The word *wrath* appears 256 times in the King James Version of the Bible. Webster's dictionary defines it as "1: strong vengeful anger or indignation; 2: retributory punishment for an offense or a crime: divine chastisement."¹ Today we will focus on the second definition and how the seven last plagues revolve around the wrath of God being poured out as a response to Satan's attacks.

The enemy's kingdom will dry up and fall.

Giving Up the Holy Ghost

Paul, in Romans 1, reminds us that God's wrath is poured out on the ungodly and unrighteous (verse 18). Several times throughout the chapter he tells us what will happen to those individuals who continually say no to the Holy Spirit's promptings. God gives them up (verse 26) to their own devices and cannot work with them. Because He is a gentleman and does not force His love upon anyone, His only choice is to depart from them. God's wrath is synonymous with the unpardonable sin and the reality that He must eventually separate Himself from those who continue in their rebellion against Him who is the source of life.

The Seven First Plagues

The seven last plagues are foreshadowed in the Exodus experience. Pharaoh was given multiple opportunities through Moses and Aaron to surrender his heart, but instead, we are told that "Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he harkened not unto them, as the LORD has said" (Exod. 8:19). Pharaoh's defiance stands in stark contrast to how God's end-time church will react. They have believed the gospel. And they sing the song of Moses (Rev. 15:3) because like the Israelites who rejoiced with singing when they were brought out from the bondage of a cruel pharaoh, they have been delivered from the oppressive regime of the adversary of God.

Paradise Lost Forever

The seven last plagues describe what will happen to those who fully reject the gospel; the life, death, and resurrection of our Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ. Because they refuse the Light, they come under judgment (John 3:19). They will be "tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels" (Rev. 14:10), not because God is malicious or sadistic but because of God's righteous presence in His people. In contrast to the darkness of sin, the light of Christ will be like a burning fire, convicting the

lost of their transgressions. Yes, there will be physical manifestations of destruction, but it is all a result of a corrupt spiritual condition.

Each vial/bowl/cup of wrath that is poured out shows us how deep the condemnation is felt by the lost. Vials one through four tell us that to some the weight of unresolved sin becomes a “grievous and noisome sore” (Rev. 16:2). No matter what human means are tried, like the Egyptians, they cannot scrape away the sickness of their sin. To others Christ is discarded like a lifeless “dead man” who has no power. They forfeit ever being remade into the image of God, that is, “living souls.” Those who have violently rejected the gospel, shedding “the blood of saints and prophets” (verse 6), now despair at their impending doom. Even those who claimed loyalty to but misrepresent the name of Jesus will also suffer this fate. They have cursed and “blasphemed the name of God, . . . and they repented not to give him glory” (verse 9).

Can you see why God is angry? The Father, Son, and Spirit are not only infinitely saddened by those who will miss out on the new earth for all eternity. God is infuriated by a system that has killed His children. In the fifth and sixth plagues, He is ready to take action by pouring out His vials on the counterfeit trinity; the corrupt dragon, beast, and false prophet. As Cyrus the Great once sieged Babylon by diverting the Euphrates River away from the city, it will be clear that Jesus, the Living Water, and all the blessings that He once offered freely to the lost will now be out of reach. The enemy’s kingdom will dry up and fall. Everyone’s choices will be solidified, but Satan will use this one last opportunity to deepen the deception. Just as a frog catches prey with its tongue, Satan will continue speaking lies to trap the lost and rally them, one last time, against the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed Is He That Watcheth

Finally, in verse 15, Jesus assures us that it is the lost who will be caught off guard suddenly when He comes as a thief. We are given a sobering warning to keep our garments, not of cloth but of His righteousness, so that we may not suffer the same fate as those who are left in a naked, fallen state without Christ. Satan may try to exploit our human weakness and shame us into identifying with our past guilt, but we can know that Jesus has rescued us. May we take hold of the life-giving power of the everlasting gospel so that we will never have to suffer separation from God, the bitter cup that Christ has already endured on our behalf.

REACT

1. What is the difference between human wrath and God’s wrath?
2. What other similarities can you see between the plagues of Egypt and the seven last plagues?
3. How do we avoid being among those who receive the seven last plagues?

1. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “wrath,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wrath>.

Testimony

God's Acting Weird

Ezek. 33:11

“To our merciful God the act of punishment is a strange act. ‘As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.’ Ezekiel 33:11. The Lord is ‘merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, . . . forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.’ Yet He will ‘by no means clear the guilty.’ ‘The Lord is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked.’ Exodus 34:6, 7; Nahum 1:3. By terrible things in righteousness He will vindicate the authority of His downtrodden law. The severity of the retribution awaiting the transgressor may be judged by the Lord’s reluctance to execute justice. The nation with which He bears long, and which He will not smite until it has filled up the measure of its iniquity in God’s account, will finally drink the cup of wrath unmixed with mercy.”¹

“The law is not abrogated; it has not lost one jot of its force.”

“The God of justice did not spare His Son. . . . The whole debt for the transgression of God’s law was demanded from our Mediator. A full atonement was required. How appropriate are the words of Isaiah, ‘It pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief.’ His soul was made ‘an offering for sin.’ ‘He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities’ (Isaiah 53:10, 5).

“Jesus suffered the extreme penalty of the law for our transgression, and justice was fully satisfied. The law is not abrogated; it has not lost one jot of its force. Instead, it stands forth in holy dignity, Christ’s death on the cross testifying to its immutability. Its demands have been met, its authority maintained. . . .

“Was the penalty remitted because He was the Son of God? Were the evils of wrath withheld from Him who was made sin for us? Without abatement the penalty fell upon our divine-human Substitute.

“Hear His cry, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Mark 15:34). He was treated as a sinner, that we might be treated as righteous, that God might be just, and yet the justifier of the sinner. . . .

“Language is too feeble for us to attempt to portray the love of God. We believe it, we rejoice in it, but we cannot comprehend it.”²

REACT

1. How do you see God’s love reflected in His judgments?
2. How are you preparing yourself to escape the judgment that is soon to come?

1. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 627.

2. Ellen G. White, *In Heavenly Places*, p. 15.

Rev. 7:1-3; 14:9, 10

Evidence *Sealed Instead*

During ancient times, seals were used to indicate that a document was official and had the approval of a king or governing body. Each governing body had their own unique seal, and it was clear where the seal came from. It can be thought of as a type of signature. The United States still possesses and uses an official great seal (as does each individual state). “Currently the seal is affixed to instruments of ratification of treaties; proclamations of treaties; full powers; exequaturs; presidential warrants for the extradition of fugitives from the justice of the United States; and commissions of cabinet officers, ambassadors, foreign service officers, and all other civil officers appointed by the president whose commissions are not required by law to issue under another seal.”¹ In other words, seals still hold their basic purpose: to authenticate.

God has given us an alternative choice, as He always does.

In the book of Revelation we are presented with two different indicators of who you stand with at the end time: the seal of God and the mark of the beast.

In biblical usage, the Greek word for “seal” used in Revelation 7:2 can mean a something by which anything is authenticated.² When something is authenticated, it is proved to be genuine or true. Once a letter or decree had been impressed with the seal of the king, it could not be undone or revoked (cf. Esther 8:8). So once God’s people in the end times are authenticated by His seal, they are approved by Him and will not be refused into His kingdom.

The second indicator is the mark of the beast. The Greek word, *charagma*, used in this text for “mark” is used the same way as the Hebrew word *qa’āqa’* in Leviticus 19:28, which tells us not to make any marks on ourselves. Throughout Scripture this word is consistently used in a negative way. To date, when something or someone has a mark, it has been singled out by a marksman or sharpshooter for death.

Though the outlook for those who will receive the mark is grim, God has given us an alternative choice, as He always does. He has even delayed the destruction of the earth until His people are sealed (Rev. 7:3) because He wants to give us every possible chance to choose life, instead of death.

REACT

What are some things we mark ourselves with today that are not of God?

1. “Great Seal of the United States,” Encyclopedia Britannica.com, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Great-Seal-of-the-United-States>.

2. “KJV: Lexicon :: Strong’s G4973 – *sphragis*,” Outline of Biblical Usage, Blue Letter Bible, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong’s=G4973&t=KJV>.

How-to
Attention! Attention!

Rev. 16:1-16

God is expert at getting our attention. Whether He speaks, acts, or commands nature, there is no question that He is able to make Himself known to humankind. Despite this reality, the possibility of missing out on the message God has for us is still very great.

So great, in fact, that Revelation 16 describes a group of people experiencing the seven last plagues, yet still unwilling to acknowledge God! How is this possible? Some would even think it's absurd! However, learning the lessons that God calls our attention to now will not only help us understand who He is but help us trust Him as He leads our future.

***Our response to uncontrollable circumstances
reveals our character.***

Learn to let go of control. From shifting the dial on the thermostat to manipulating natural processes for our benefit, humanity has become consumed with controlling every aspect of life. Psalm 37:5 reminds us to “commit [our] way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.” Begin now asking God to help you make decisions in your life. Bounce your ideas and opinions off God in prayer. Is this what the Lord would have you do? Wait for His response, and trust His control.

Our response to uncontrollable circumstances reveals our character. Do we worry? Do we continuously doubt and question God's role in leading our lives? James 1:2, 3 encourages us to appreciate the difficulties in our lives and receive them as an opportunity to confront the often hidden imperfections in our character. When you face your next obstacle, try praising God despite the difficulties you face. Mark the changes in your attitude. God not only will lead you through the obstacles but will teach you how to respond to them.

Make a regular practice of acknowledging God in your life. Through praise, repentance, prayer, service, and the study of God's Word, we acknowledge God's presence in our life. When we accept God's presence individually, we are able to see more clearly how He operates in the world around us. Often, our lack of acknowledgement can cause more unwanted self-inflicted hardship. “Let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, . . . giving thanks to his name” (Heb. 13:15).

REACT

1. What do the seven last plagues reveal about those who experience them?
2. When God calls for our attention, what are the different ways people respond to Him?

Michelle Odinma, Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA

Rev. 16:10, 11

Opinion *Love Is a Plague*

Preachers tend to avoid the seven last plagues like, well . . . the plague. We avoid talking about the plagues because they can raise serious questions about the character of God. When the fifth angel darkens the kingdom of the beast, we are told that “people gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains . . . , but they refused to repent” (Rev. 16:10, 11, NIV).

Part of our problem with the God of plagues is that we expect Him to contradict Himself. We want the loving, Gandhi-God of nonviolent love who might weep over a mosquito’s demise. But we also want the just God who rides in with the cavalry to destroy our oppressors. In other words, we want a bloodless cross. We want salvation without suffering; we want a hell without fire. We want justice without punishment.

We want salvation without suffering.

Yet still, how can the Creator kill the fish (third plague) or superheat the sun (fourth plague)? How can He inflict sores on His own children? We should be careful about offering suspiciously easy answers to get God off the hook. There’s a reason Isaiah describes God’s judgment as “his strange work” and “his alien task” (Isa. 28:21, NIV). With all of this in mind, I believe we need to understand three things about the plagues:

God’s goal is not to inflict suffering. God is not a masochist (Ezek. 33:11). In Isaiah, God promises to send hail in order to “sweep away your refuge, the lie” (Isa. 28:17, NIV). In other words, God sometimes sends physical judgments in order to undermine the lies we have built our lives upon so that we can build our lives on a better foundation.

God’s goal is not to drive the wicked to repent. On the contrary, we are told twice in Revelation 16 that the people refused to repent. The final plagues then reveal to the universe that everyone who would have turned to God already has. His mercy would have no effect.

God’s goal is to liberate His people. Revelation’s plagues are modeled after Egypt’s plagues. In both cases, the goal of the plagues is to free God’s people from the suffocating grip of oppression. Pharaoh Satan will never “let [God’s] people go” (Exod. 9:1). The cross proved this. It is time for Satan and his followers to bear the consequences. Only a loving God will give justice.

REACT

How would you answer a critic who says the plagues prove God is cruel?

Laura Lucio, Peoria, Illinois, USA

Exploration

Preparing for the Seven Last Plagues

Rev. 16:1

CONCLUDE

In the time of Moses, God used plagues to help harden the heart of Pharaoh, allowing the children of Israel to be set free. These events symbolized what would happen in the last days. The angels were told by a great voice, “Pour out the vials of the wrath of God upon the earth” (Rev. 16:1). Once the plagues are poured out, there may be a few who try to reason them away. However, it is only through Christ and His transforming power that we can be safe during these end-time events. Are you ready?

CONSIDER

- Composing a list of each plague and the supporting texts and share how we can know what to do when that time comes.
- Creating a song using the seven plagues and sharing it with your Sabbath School class or your youth group.
- Studying the account of the plagues in Egypt and the seven last plagues and creating a poster to put up in your classroom.
- Writing a prayer to help you be ready for the end-time events covered in this lesson.
- Creating a game with the seven last plagues and the verses where they are found. You may want to use note cards and make seven cards with one plague each, then seven cards with the verse of each plague.
- Making a short video containing what you learned this week and how it has helped you be ready. You could also use social media to share what you have learned with your friends.

CONNECT

Exodus 40:34, 35; 1 Kings 8:10, 11; Revelation 7:1–3; 14:9, 10; 15:1–8.
Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 201; *The Great Controversy*, pp. 613, 614.