

February 8, 2026—“The Seven Bowls”

Today we’re celebrating a baptism in our Vineland location... while also studying the Battle of Armageddon! Like trying to suntan in a snowstorm, how will we do both?

The Battle of Armageddon—like the 1998 movie starring Bruce Willis (and a boatload of other huge Hollywood stars!)—is a final battle between good and evil at the end of time, that is part of a broader prophetic vision of a series of natural disasters that precede the end of the world. And they originate in the passage we’re studying today:

I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues...

As you experienced during portions of its plain reading, these two chapters describing the seven bowls containing the seven last plagues reads as a bad-to-worse blowup.

Unlike the previous two seven-fold series we’ve looked at, where the warnings of the seven seals applied to “one-fourth” of people and then “one third” in the case of the seven trumpets, here, this vision unleashes in a way that is “full and complete”. And where, in each of the previous two series, there was an interlude between the sixth and seventh repetition, leading to a surprising twist of God’s grace in the seventh, it feels as if these seven bowls unleashing these seven last plagues are delivered uninterrupted and in increasingly rapid succession. The scariest part is how these seven plagues represent the wrath of God, and feel like a final release of pent-up anger and frustration.

But, in this reading of the passage, we ignore a number of critical details that tell a different story—one that, like the rest of the book of Revelation, seeks not to *invoke fear*, but to *inspire faith*. So today, we want to unpack this great reversal for ourselves.

It begins with this seven-fold literary structure, where—in this case—there is an interlude. But instead of happening between the sixth and seventh warning, it happens at the very beginning of John’s description of this sign. And, oddly, in light of the harsh content of the sign, the interlude is one of worship, where John hears people singing:

Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.

Now, again, at first glance it might feel like faithful followers of Jesus—particularly martyrs who lost their lives because of their faith—are praising God in anticipation of the revenge God is about to seek through these seven plagues. But not only does that not make sense of the “turn the other cheek” heart of Jesus; it doesn’t make sense of the grammar of the song—because the song is sung in the *past tense*: God’s righteous acts *have been revealed*. As a worship song people are praising God for what He *has done*.

More specifically, the introduction of the worship song provides even more clues:

(The victorious) held harps given them by God and sang the song of God’s servant Moses and of the Lamb.

This song that opens this vision of John—serving as kind of a tone-setter or spoiler alert for the rest of the vision—refers specifically to the Lamb, meaning the Person of Jesus.

As well, though, notice it refers to “God’s servant Moses *and* the Lamb”, tying the work of Jesus to the Exodus story of the nation of Israel. The song, in fact, is packed with language from Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 31-32, describing what God *had* done for Israel, and now comparing it to what God *had* done in Jesus—all *in the past tense*.

That segues smoothly to the second clue contained in this vision: that the seven plagues themselves are strong parallels to the ten plagues God delivered against Egypt that set Israel free in the Exodus. In fact, as the opening worship song interlude completes, the vision of the unleashing of the seven plagues begins this way:

After this I looked, and I saw in heaven the temple—that is, the tabernacle of the covenant law—and it was opened. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues.

These plagues that John sees flow out of a temple that John refers to as “the tabernacle of the covenant law”. This is a direct reference to the worship tent the Israelites made during the Exodus time, that housed the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. So, already, these references are tying the unleashing of the plagues to the Exodus story.

Then there’s the seven plagues themselves. We’ve learned already in our study of the book of Revelation how the numbers seven and ten represent completeness, so it now feels like the ten plagues of the Exodus and these seven plagues being compared somewhat interchangeably: water is turned into blood, people are affected with disease, the sun is turned dark. It’s as if this “song of the Lamb” which is also “of Moses” is intentionally being re-described all over again, where Jesus is providing a *new Exodus*.

Appreciate though, that the downbeat of the Exodus story—and its memory among generations of God’s people—was one of *good news*. The tone wasn’t of final destruction, but of freedom and being finally released. The Exodus was the way people got to experience the fullness of flourishing, being released from the tyranny of empire.

This is the comparison John is making in this vision—that the work of Jesus for humanity is like what God did for Israel in the Exodus—and, remember, it’s past tense.

If you're not already starting to sense the great reversal contained in this vision, I think the next clue will certainly help. It focuses on the Battle of Armageddon itself:

The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East... (Evil spirits) go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty... They gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

As the plagues are escalating to a final crescendo, leaders and spirits gather at a place called Armageddon. Here's the thing though: there is no real place called Armageddon.

The word "Armageddon" is actually a compound of two words: "Har" and "Megiddo". "Har" meant mountain, and "Megiddo" meant a place. The actual place called Megiddo, though, was a valley, not a mountain. This language is symbolic.

On the one hand, the reference to Megiddo would have represented a battleground, because several times in Israel's history, major battles were fought in that valley. Among a variety of Old Testament kings, most notably King Josiah of Judah and King Neco of Egypt fought in that valley—interestingly enough, with Egypt winning.

The surprising twist here is found in the word "Har", because a mountain symbolized the heavens and earth meeting (if you've ever been to Banff, you know what I mean!). So, instead of the typical battle—and loss—in the *valley* of Megiddo, Armageddon represents an inversion where heaven comes to earth to do the opposite.

Then—as a fourth clue, on top of what this play on words suggests—appreciate that there is no Battle of Armageddon. By Revelation 19, Jesus arrives and this battle is never fought. So Bruce Willis will have to wait another day, because this image and symbolism refers to Jesus, like Moses, doing something different—in the past tense.

To me, this leads to the ultimate clue provided in this vision, found in John's description of the seventh and final plague that's unleashed. In verse 17, it says:

The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, “It is finished!”

All of the graphic imagery that follows—the earthquakes and hailstorms—are the result of this declaration of finalization that, to John's audience, would have sounded eerily familiar to the other time John quoted this phrase—as the only gospel writer to do so:

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

If the worship to start and the comparison of the Lamb to the Exodus and the surprising twists around the imagery of Armageddon weren't clear enough, this should help us see that John's not providing a picture of what *will* come in the future, but instead, is retelling through imagery the story of what has *already* happened through Jesus' death.

That, in fact, is what he states as he introduces and then reintroduces the vision:

I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God's wrath is completed... no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

To be clear: this vision John shares to first-century followers of Jesus is not using symbolism and imagery to capture a reality he predicts one day in the future. It's intended to capture—with more cinematic “wow” than a 1998 blockbuster movie—what Jesus Christ has *already accomplished spiritually*. This is not a revelation of what's to come; it's a revelation of what Jesus *has done* and already accomplished spiritually.

As if that wasn't enough, consider a few more critical details. First, understand that this vision of plagues being unleashed is against "Babylon". Verse 19 says:

The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath.

We've learned in recent weeks that Babylon was an Old Testament reference to the Empire of Israel's day, that now served to be symbolic of the evil forces of empire: power, money, and state-sponsored religion that combines and abuses the two. The image John is sharing is not of plagues being unleashed on individual people, but rather, describing the effects of Jesus' death over the sin, evil, and death of empire.

Second, let's appreciate what "wrath" means in the context of John's vision. When we use the word "wrath", we typically mean some kind of revenge delivered with fury. In this context, "wrath" is "the strong and settled opposition to all that is evil". This is what Jesus delivered spiritually through His sacrificial death on the cross.

Related to that, let's appreciate what the word "plague" actually means. It's used as part of John's imagery here, but everywhere else in the New Testament that word is translated as "beatings". It often refers to the beatings that Jesus followers took for their faith—which John's audience would have been familiar with. But now, in the past tense, John is using the word to describe the spiritual beating that Jesus provided to sin, evil, and death, that still expresses itself in their world through the forces of empire.

Through a very unique and, to us, confusing literary style, John is painting a picture of what it looked like, spiritually, when Jesus died—how He unleashed a beating, as a strong opposition to all this evil, defeating what now expresses itself as empire.

Can we put those clues all together to see the picture John is trying to paint here?

1. The early interlude of worship praises what God has done in Jesus
2. The seven plagues similarly mirror the ten plagues of the Exodus story (a good news story of freedom and release from the evils of empire)
3. “Armageddon” was a play-on-words describing heaven now coming to places formerly known for battle and defeat
4. The “Battle of Armageddon” actually never happened
5. The past-tense language, culminating in the “It is finished!” is referring to what Jesus has already done
6. The plagues unleashed against “Babylon” oppose the forces of empire (power & money)
7. The “plagues” are the “beating” administered against these evil forces through Jesus’ sacrificial death

Is this helping you see the great reversal John is communicating through this vision?

He's described the work of Christ in spiritual terms—the spiritual victory Jesus' death accomplished over sin, death, and evil back in chapter 12. But, conceding the already-accomplished-but-not-yet-fully-claimed spiritual interim in which his readers, and us, still find ourselves, John's helped them appreciate that this lingering reality of sin, evil, and death plays out day-to-day in the reality of empire, and the human temptations to seek power and money (the two beats of chapter 13). After reminding his original hearers that how you live on earth matters—especially in cultures that invite embracing the values of empire (chapter 14)—he's now encouraging his readers to choose Jesus instead of empire—even though it's beating them down—because of how overwhelmingly Jesus has already defeated all of that from a spiritual perspective.

Revelation 15-16 is not a prediction of how the world will end. And the harshness of its language isn't directed at a humanity God loves. The sign of the seven plagues, including the Battle of Armageddon, is symbolism to highlight the past, of what Jesus has already done, for a humanity He loves. It's not to invoke fear, but to inspire faith.

This is the kind of great reversal that the Book of Revelation—and the Person of Jesus—are inviting us into today. If you’re brand new to this, appreciate that the stuff you’ve gotten the sense that the Bible says is not always what the Bible intends to say. Specifically considering the passage today, God is not sitting up in heaven waiting for his alarm to sound, when He can finally unleash his fury on humanity through a set of natural disasters before He wipes out the world as we know it. Even though that’s how the plain reading feels, that’s nowhere close to what the original author, through an understandably confusing literary style of imagery and symbolism, intended to say. This passage isn’t describing a God who’s waiting to unleash wrath on people; it describes a Jesus who’s already given His life to beat down the forces in our world that beat people down, and to invite us into a fuller, freer life of flourishing through following Him.

And, specifically for those who’ve made that choice and are on that journey, today’s passage is intended to encourage you. Because—as we’ve appreciated these past few weeks—following Jesus can be hard. Seeking to centre your life on Jesus, and increasingly embrace His others-oriented, privilege-relinquishing-for-the-sake-of-the-less-privileged, self-emptying love in a world that invites bigger and better when it comes to things like money and power is tough. And sometimes, trying to make that choice can feel like you’re taking a beating—a beating to your reputation, a beating to your bank account, or a beating to your vision of a more comfortable future. Can you appreciate that those beatings are ultimately worth it, because of the full and free life that Jesus enabled through His sacrificial death and miraculous resurrection for you?

Today’s passage wasn’t intended to invoke fear of an angry God, but to inspire faith in Jesus’ perfect love. Can we give Jesus more of a chance in our lives today?