

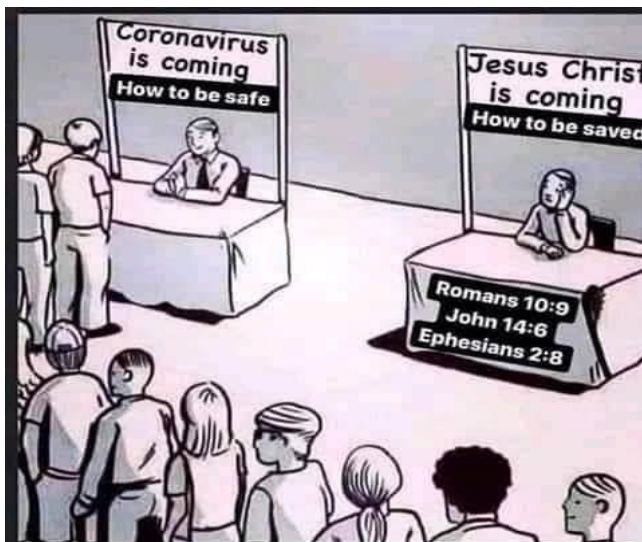
“They Did Not Repent” (Revelation 16)

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Brian Watson

One of the more frustrating things in life is that people seldom change. Or, so it seems. Perhaps I should say that they seldom change for the better, since people do frequently change for the worse. How often do we see people who have bad habits not change them, because breaking bad habits is hard work? How often do we see people who have addictions fail to break free of them? How often do people who are unhealthy make lasting changes to their diet and start exercising on a regular basis?

Changes are hard work, but they’re not impossible. We often make changes in our lives based on what we think is most important. Recently, I saw someone re-post a little one-panel comic strip online.¹ This image was made last year, toward the beginning of the pandemic. In the picture, there are two tables or booths manned by one person each. On the left, the booth has a sign that says, “Coronavirus is coming. How to be safe.” There’s a long line of people there to learn how to avoid the coronavirus. We can imagine the person at the booth telling people to stay at home, avoid the sick, and get a vaccine when it’s available. We have seen people make large changes in their lives, from working or learning at home, to wearing masks everywhere, to not going out to eat or to movies or other social events. What motivated that change? A desire to not get sick, a desire not to die.



¹ Here it is:

If we strongly desire something, we will be willing to change in order to achieve our goal. That's why some people do change. They finally want to lose weight. They want to make money. They want to improve a relationship. They desperately want to break free from an addiction. So, they do the hard work of dieting and exercising, or working harder and saving money, or seeking help.

In that same comic, on the right, there is a second booth. That booth has a sign that says, "Jesus is coming. How to be saved." And no one is in line. The point is that people don't see this as a need, they don't think there is a time when Jesus will return to earth or when they will die and stand before Jesus in judgment. Perhaps they don't think Jesus is real or that God really exists. So, they're not lined up to learn how they can be saved. They may think, "Saved from what?" The answer is saved from condemnation, from the penalty of sin, which is lawlessness, a rebellion against God, a failure to love him, to desire him.

Now, one can want to be safe from a virus and be saved from condemnation. It's no sin to do learn how to avoid something like the coronavirus. But the point is that we should desire God and desire to be right with him more than anything else. The same comic could have featured a booth that said, "Danger is coming. How to be secure." The answers could range from having more guns and a greater security system to having more money, from having an underground shelter stocked with food to investing in gold. The booth could have said, "How to have peace," with answers ranging from meditation to medication. The point, again, is that we want to be safe, we want to be well, we want to have pleasures and all kinds of things. But do we really want God? Are we willing to change in order to be in the right with him?

I ask that question because today, as we continue to study the book of Revelation, we'll see images of seven angels pouring out seven bowls of the wrath of God. These are judgments against sin and sinners. Each bowl that is poured out results in some awful punishment. Yet there is something stunning: Instead of people turn to God for salvation, instead of people begging for mercy, what we see is that some people will refuse to repent. They will refuse to change. Even in the face of punishment, even in the face of judgment, they will still fail to desire God. They would rather cling to their old ways of life than change.

Today, we're looking at Revelation 16. We'll start by reading the first seven verses:

¹ Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, "Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God."

² So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.

³ The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea.

⁴ The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. ⁵ And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say,

“Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was,
for you brought these judgments.

⁶ For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets,
and you have given them blood to drink.
It is what they deserve!”

⁷ And I heard the altar saying,

“Yes, Lord God the Almighty,
true and just are your judgments!”²

These seven bowls of God’s wrath are similar to what we saw earlier in Revelation. In chapter 6 and chapter 8, seven seals that bound a scroll were opened. Each time a seal was opened, some type of judgment occurred. In chapters 8, 9, and 11, seven trumpets were blown. Each time a trumpet was played, judgments occurred. Here, we have seven bowls of golden wrath. One Old Testament passage that this image might be drawn from is Psalm 79, which says,

⁶ Pour out your anger on the nations
that do not know you,
and on the kingdoms
that do not call upon your name!

⁷ For they have devoured Jacob
and laid waste his habitation (Psalm 79:6–7).

That Psalm talks about how nations have come to Jerusalem to attack it, to defile its temple, and to kill God’s people (Ps. 79:1–3). The psalmist asks God to avenge his people, to pour out his wrath on them, to return to them sevenfold what they have done to Israel (Ps. 79.12).

Here, in Revelation, God pours out his wrath because he hates sin. Sin is an evil power which destroys the good which God has made. Sinners rebel against God, and he cannot allow sin to go unchecked. God has wrath because he loves. He is fiercely protective of his people and even of his own glory. When God’s people were enslaved in Egypt, when they were sorely

² All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

oppressed by a nation of people who didn't worship God but worshiped false gods instead, God issued a series of judgments against them and their gods. He sent plagues upon them, and these seven bowls of God's wrath echo those plagues in Exodus.

The first bowl creates painful and harmful sores on everyone who worshiped an idol, in this case the beast, a satanic agent we met in chapter 13. This punishment echoes the boils of the sixth plague that came upon Egypt (Exod. 9:8–11). Boils were also the punishment for those who broke covenant with God (Deut. 28:27, 35), those who failed to live life on God's terms.

We're also told that the second and third bowls lead to bodies of water becoming like blood—and not the nice clean blood given in a blood donation, but the blood of corpses. The result is that everything in the sea died. This is similar to the first plague in Exodus, when the Nile turned to blood (Exod. 7:17–21). It's also similar to the second trumpet, when a third of the sea creatures died (Rev. 8:8–9). I think the bowls are basically the same judgments as the trumpets and seals, but they are depicted in worse terms.³ There's an intensification of these images of judgment that serves a literary purpose. They're meant to warn the readers of Revelation that judgment is coming, and it will be terrible.

If one wonders why these judgments must be so terrible, the answer is found in verses 5 and 6. An angel says that God is condemning people who shed the blood of God's people, the prophets and saints. (By the way, notice that the angel says that God was and is, but not that he will come again—that is because God has now come. This is a reference to the second coming of Jesus.) God gives them the appropriate penalty: they will drink blood—their own blood! This calls back to a passage in Isaiah, which says God will contend with those who contend against his people (Isa. 49:25–26). He will make Israel's oppressors eat their own flesh and drink their own blood. It is what they deserve.

Notice also that in verse 7, the altar says that God's judgments are true and just. God is doing what is right. The altar may be saying this because earlier in Revelation, in chapter 6, we were told that the souls of those who were martyred appeared under the altar, and they cried out to God to avenge their deaths (Rev. 6:9–10). Those who were killed simply for being Christians were asking for God to repay those who had killed them. God is right to give such people a just punishment, a punishment that fits the crime.

³ The relationship between these series of seven is surely more complicated. The bowls seem to represent final judgments, whereas the first few seals and trumpets could represent judgments that occur throughout this age.

What's amazing is that even as people receive such punishment, they refuse to acknowledge what they've done. They don't repent. They don't worship God. They would rather curse him even as they are being punished. Look at verses 8–11:

⁸ The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. ⁹ They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory.

¹⁰ The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish ¹¹ and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds.

Earlier in Revelation, God promised that his people would not be harmed by the sun or scorching heat (Rev. 7:16). But those who are against God are burned by the sun and its heat. Still, they refuse to turn from their sins to God. Instead, they curse God.

God then gives them the opposite of that great light, and instead plunges them into darkness. Yet, again, they refuse to repent. Instead, they gnaw their tongues in anguish. God gave us larynxes, vocal cords, tongues, mouths, and lips to praise his name. By refusing to praise God and give him glory, we are going against nature. Perhaps these people are gnawing their tongues rather than praise God, sort of like cutting off your nose to spite your face.

We have already seen in Revelation this refusal to repent. There was a false teacher in the church in Thyatira who refused to repent (Rev. 2:21). And there are people today who refuse to turn from sin and to Jesus. These people need not have killed Christians. Anyone who rejects the true God and his Son, or who is even apathetic about him, refuses to repent and give God glory.

There are people who seem to rage against God. Even though they owe their very existence to God, even though God has given them life and breath and everything they have, they rage against God. This was what one theologian, Cornelius Van Til, observed. The story is that he was on a train when he saw a father and a child. The child was sitting on the father's lap, and something displeased the child, so the child slapped the father. And Van Til thought, "That's what the atheist is doing. God is not just like a parent, who gives the child life. He supports that person throughout his life, just as the father supported the child on his lap. And yet the atheist is trying to slap God in the face." His actual words are these: "Christ upholds even those who

ignore, deny, and oppose him. A little child may slap his father in the face, but it can do so only because the father holds it on his knee.”⁴

I realize there are some people who think that they are not raging against God. They’re certainly not actively persecuting God’s people. Yet they still refuse to give God glory by acknowledging that Jesus is his Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords, and the world’s only Savior. And, in a quiet way, that is raging against God. There are many ways to fail to love someone. Yes, you can hate someone by cursing them or attacking the people they love. But you can also hate someone through neglect.

I alluded to this a couple of weeks ago, but I should be more explicit now. I had mentioned something that Tim Keller has written about the objection that so-called “good people” shouldn’t be condemned by God. This is what he writes:

Imagine a widow has a son she raises and puts through good schools and a good university at great sacrifice to herself, for she is a woman of very slender means. And as she’s raising him she says, “Son, I want you to live a good life. I want you to always tell the truth, always work hard, and care for the poor.” And after the young man graduates from college he goes off into his career and life—and never speaks to his mother or spends time with her. Oh, he may send her a card on her birthday, but he never phones or visits. What if you asked him about his relationship with his mother, and he responded: “No, I don’t have anything to do with her personally. But I always tell the truth, work hard, and care for the poor. I’ve lived a good life—that’s all that matters, isn’t it?”

I doubt you would be satisfied with that answer. It is not enough for the man to merely live a moral life as his mother desired without having any kind of relationship with her. His behavior is condemnable because in fact she gave him all he has. More than just a moral life, he owes her his love and loyalty.

And if there is a God, you owe him literally everything. If there is a God, you owe him far more than a morally decent life. He deserves to be at the center of your life. Even if you are a good person but you are not letting God be God to you, you are . . . guilty of sin. . . . You are being your own savior and lord.⁵

It’s because the nature of the relationship between God and the people he has created that neglecting him is sin. It’s the same thing with this case of the mother and her son. A son who neglects his mother, particularly a widow who has sacrificed for her son, isn’t a good son. A husband or wife who neglects his or her spouse isn’t a good spouse, simply because of the nature

⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1963), 147–48.

⁵ Timothy Keller, *Encounters with Jesus: Unexpected Answers to Life’s Biggest Questions* (New York: Dutton, 2013), 36–37.

of the relationship. A lack of love and affection in such a relationship isn't merely the absence of something good. That lack of love and affection is painful.

Now, God isn't a lonely widow or a love-starved spouse. God doesn't need us or our attention. But God chose to create us so that we would reflect his glorious nature and so that we would praise him, love him, and obey him. To act as if God isn't real, to live as functional atheists, is to slap God in his face. Again, it is to go against nature. And God won't have that forever. There can never be lasting peace in this world while there is rebellion against God.

Let's move on. We'll now read verses 12–16:

¹²The 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. ¹³And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. ¹⁴For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. ¹⁵(“Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!”) ¹⁶And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

And now we come to Armageddon. This passage, like many others in Revelation, has attracted some fanciful interpretations. The word literally means “mountain of Megiddo.” Megiddo was a city in Israel where some battles took place (Judg. 5:19; 2 Kgs. 23:29; 2 Chron. 35:20–22). These battles took place between Israel and other, ungodly nations. The idea here seems to be that God will prepare the way for ungodly peoples to attack his own people, or to at least to perform some kind of evil. We're told that the Euphrates will dry up, which must be an act of God, and kings from the east will come. In the Old Testament, kings from the east, leading nations like Assyria and Babylon, did come to attack Israel, to punish the Israelites because they had turned to idols instead of worshiping the true God. Those ungodly nations would also be punished by God, but God can use ungodly instruments to do his will.

All those fanciful interpretations assume that this will be a literal battle. But there are some problems with that interpretation. The first problem is there is no mountain of Megiddo. There are some mountains not terribly far away, including Mount Carmel, but they aren't in Megiddo. Another problem is that Old Testament prophecies about “the final battle of history”

state that the battle will be in Jerusalem or Mount Zion, which is something like 60 miles away.⁶ Another problem is that the places mentioned in Revelation are not literal. Babylon certainly isn't a reference to the land of Babylon. And what is happening here seems to parallel what happens in chapter 19 and 20, when there is a final battle against God and his people, where the geographical location isn't clear.

What seems to be happening is that God is saying, "Remember all those terrible battles at Megiddo? Remember when I brought Assyria and Babylon to attack Israel? Well, something like that will occur, but it will be even worse." And I don't think this will be a literal battle against God. After all, how could an army attack God? He is everywhere, but he is also a spirit. And how could evil kings attack all of God's people? God's people live across the world. There's no one location where they are located. But whenever people ignore God, whenever they sin, it is an attack on God. And it seems that right before Jesus returns, there will be greater evil and deception.

That deception is depicted in verses 13 and 14. We're told that out of the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the second beast, called the "false prophet" here, come unclean spirits that look like frogs. Odd stuff, to be sure. The dragon is Satan, and the beast is his agent that seems to represent ungodly systems, even governments. The second beast represents all false prophets or religious teachers. This is an unholy, false trinity. They deceive people through unclean, demonic spirits, performing counterfeit miracles. They are on the side of the wicked kings, stirring them up to make war against God.

The bit about frogs reminds us of the second plague against Egypt, when God caused the land to be full of frogs (Exod. 8:1–7). Again, that's an odd event, but it had meaning. There were some gods associated with, or represented by gods, in Egypt, including one named Heqt or Heqet, the goddess of resurrection. The idea was something like this: God was saying, "If you like your frog gods so much, I'll give you all the frogs you could ever desire." In chapter 13, we were told that the beast had something of a resurrection, and perhaps the idea is that these frog-like unclean spirits deceive people into thinking that the powers of Satan and this world can bring about resurrection. But that's wrong. Satan and idols are not life-giving. They can't give us safety, security, peace, and eternal life with God. Their message is a lie.

⁶ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 838.

Jesus tells us to stay on guard, to stay awake, because he will come like a thief in the night, which is what we read in other parts of the New Testament (Matt. 24:42–43; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10). We don't know when Jesus will come back, but he will. We must be ready by living for him now, by not being fooled by false teaching about God, by not worshiping idols, and by not living as everyone else lives.

(By the way, I find it quite ironic that those end-time enthusiasts who believe there will be a literal Armageddon try to speculate when Jesus will return. But in the same passage, Jesus says he will come like a thief, and thieves don't tell you when they're going to come to steal your belongings. It dishonors Jesus to not understand his word as he intends it to be understood.)

The point of this passage is not to tell us when and where some final military battle will be fought. The point is that evil and deception will be great before Jesus returns. And that is the real spiritual battle, to discern between truth and lies. Christians must be careful not to fall asleep, to buy into Satan's lies, but to be ready for Jesus' return.

When Jesus returns, a final judgment will come. We read one of many depictions of this judgment at the end of the chapter. Let's read verses 17–21:

¹⁷ The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" ¹⁸ And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake. ¹⁹ The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath. ²⁰ And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found. ²¹ And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people; and they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe.

When this seventh bowl of God's wrath is poured out, it is the final judgment. We know that because whenever you read of "a great earthquake" in Revelation, it's a picture of the end. The same is true of islands and mountains fleeing away. Also, we're told, "It is done!" What is done? Judgment, God's pouring out his wrath, his destruction of "Babylon," which here is equivalent to "the cities of the nations." When Jesus said on the cross "It is finished" (John 19:30), he indicated that no further sacrifice was needed for sin. His death is enough to pay for the sins of everyone who turns to him. When we hear "It is done!" then there is no more wrath to pour out. This is the final punishment of sin, the final purging of sinners.

We're told that there is lightning, thunder, and hail. The hailstones are huge, literally the weight of a "talent," something like a hundred pounds. The hail reminds us of the seventh plague (Exod. 9:22–24). These elements of nature can be frightening. I went out running during the early evening on Friday. Though a few drops of rain were falling when I left the house, I thought I could get away with my usual run. I was wrong. Before I ran a mile, a bolt of lightning fell somewhere to my left and a giant thunderclap sounded almost at the exact time I saw the lightning. I don't know how far away the lightning, but it was close. I know that because I heard the thunder at almost the same time, and the speed of sound is significantly slower than the speed of light. I was shocked and somewhat frightened. I actually yelled. I kept running for a while, but then I stopped under a tree as it poured, hoping that I wouldn't be struck by lightning. When I was sure the lightning and thunder moved on, I ran home. But I was a bit scared. If we can be afraid of lightning, earthquakes, hail, hurricanes, and other acts of nature, shouldn't we be more afraid of the God of nature? His wrath will be far more frightening than the worst storm we have seen.

Yet the people who experience these awesome acts of nature aren't impressed or frightened. Even as God is judging them, they continue to curse God.

I know that the images of God judging seem very harsh. Some don't want that God. They prefer to have a lighter, softer God, a diet god, if you will. But this is God's word, and the fact that people are turned off by it is proof that they don't really want to hear from God. God judges sin because it is evil and destructive. He is a God of wrath. But he's also a God of love. He loves people so much that he sent his own Son into the world. Jesus, the Son of God, lived the perfect life that we don't live. He never ignored God the Father. He always praised and honored him. He always loved other people. But even though he was and is perfect, he was regarded as sin, crushed on the cross. He did this willingly. He drank the cup of God's wrath so that everyone who turns to him—everyone who repents—doesn't have to suffer God's wrath. We can be forgiven for every wrong thing we've done if we turn to Jesus and seek mercy in him.

Here is my message to non-Christians: How much would it take to get you to turn to God? How many arguments do you need? What kind of proof would get you to turn to God? God has revealed himself in his Son, who has willingly laid down his life for sinners. What is keeping you from trusting him? Perhaps it is the thought of change, of giving up what you love.

But it is better to give that up and get something far superior in Jesus than to hang on to what you love and lose everything. Turn to Jesus today.

My message to non-Christians is to stay awake, to stay grounded in the truth about Jesus, to continue to trust him and follow him. There are many deceptive messages about Jesus. People will claim non-biblical things about God. Know God's word and continue to believe it is true. Fight against Satan's schemes by resting in Christ, trusting that he will give you everything you need. Continue to trust Jesus, who drank the cup of God's wrath so that you don't have to drink it when he returns.