

Revelation as Trilogy
The Return of the King
Chapters 16: The Final Battle Begins

Introduction: This chapter follows the pattern set in chapter 8, which is a series of plagues that are unleashed upon the earth. There are, however, two major differences between these and the previous plagues. First, these plagues not only affect creation (earth, sea, rivers and sky) but they now impact human beings. Second, the destruction is not partial (one quarter or one third) but is complete. It is as if when God comes in final judgment, though repentance is possible, the central purpose is no longer to bring about repentance, but justice, meaning sentencing those who refused God's offer of love and peace, and instead chose to follow the beast in the way of evil and destruction.

The Story: The final battle begins with a voice from the Temple telling the angels to move out on their mission of judgment. The angels obey their orders and begin to pour out their wrath upon those with the mark of the beast. Angel one pours out sores on those who worship the beast. Angel number two pours out the plague of death upon the seas. Angel three pours out the plague of turning fresh water to blood, which forces those who have shed blood of the prophets and saints to drink blood rather than water. The altar itself proclaims this to be true justice because those who are evil "get what they deserve." The fourth angel pours out his bowl upon the sun, allowing it to scorch people on earth. The response of those affected is predictable. Rather than repenting, they curse God and do not give God glory. In a sense, the enemy is willing to suffer rather than change.

The fifth angel pours out his bowl on the throne of the beast, plunging the beast's kingdom into darkness. This is God taking the battle to the very heart of the enemy king, very much like Allied air raids over Berlin or Tokyo during the Second World War. God intends to discourage the enemy and cause them to surrender. The result of these attacks is that there is darkness over the kingdom. Yet again, the people refuse to give in and surrender to God. They would rather suffer and curse God.

The sixth angel pours out his bowl on the river Euphrates, drying it up, allowing the enemy to bring in reinforcements. These will include kings from the east (the location of all previous oppressing empires; Assyria, Babylon and Persia) and three foul spirits who are produced by the beast. These spirits once again imitate the Holy Spirit by performing signs. The purpose of these sign performing spirits is to entice the kings of the earth to join the Unholy Trinity in their battle with the God and the Lamb. Following this recruiting drive, there is an aside from heaven in which the faithful are warned not to let their guard down and join the enemy, because God is coming like a thief in the night. The enemy then assembles for the final battle at Armageddon, which simply means in Hebrew, the place where the armies gather.

The seventh angel pours out his bowl and in a dramatic moment, the forces of God defeat the forces of the Unholy Trinity. Notice that at this moment there is no God's army, though we will encounter one later, but that it is nature/God's creation (lighting, earthquakes, hailstones) which destroys the enemy. This connects creation's role in the conflict with its protection of the woman in the desert, when the earth swallowed up the chaos unleashed by the beast.

Reflection: for those who are Lord of the Rings fans, this chapter can be viewed as the final battle at the gates of Sauron's fortress of Barad-Dur. In that battle, as soon as the Ring of Power is destroyed, the earth gives way under Sauron's forces and the fortress itself is destroyed by an earthquake. In other words, the end comes not in a long-protracted series of battles, but in one decisive moment. This is how early Christians and Second Temple Jews envisioned God's final victory over evil. It would be an instant defeat and destruction of the enemy because ultimately God holds all power.

Questions:

1. Why do you think that evil would often rather suffer than repent?
2. Where do you see powers in this world continuing to successfully recruit Christians who are lured more by power than faithfulness?
3. Why do you think that power is so alluring?