



## THE SEVEN LAST PLAGUES

### QUEST LESSON E-8

The Problem: Does God punish unrepentant sinful men? The Bible answer is a resounding, "Yes!" There are many examples in Scripture of rebellious people being punished by God in one way or another for their wickedness. King Saul suffered the loss of God's presence and blessing. Ultimately he died a suicide on the battlefield. Because Pharaoh of Egypt, in the time of Moses, rejected the warnings of heaven, he brought upon himself and his people ten fearful plagues that God sent to change his mind. Finally he was destroyed with his army in the waters of the Red Sea. (Exodus 5-12, 14).

Sometimes the Lord allows faithful people to suffer at the hands of Satan and his human instruments. But this kind of suffering is not divine punishment. The believing Christian has the wonderful assurance that "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28).

Why does God punish wicked people who refuse to repent? Sometimes the divine retribution is designed to induce the individual to turn to the Lord. That was the purpose of the plagues that came upon Egypt. God wanted Pharaoh to understand that he could not rule, or even exist, without heaven's approval. So the Lord sent him a series of scourges to bring him to his senses and correct his stubborn pride and rebellion.

Because of his proud unwillingness to acknowledge God's sovereignty, Nebuchadnezzar suffered a period of insanity (Daniel 4:23-33). We could argue that the withdrawal of the divine presence from his life resulted in this terrible mental and physical deterioration. Or we could simply say that God brought the insanity upon him as retribution for his wickedness. Either way, the message is clear that God decreed suffering for Nebuchadnezzar with the express intent of bringing him to the point of repentance (Daniel 4:24). In this instance, God's plan was greatly productive. At the end of his period of insanity Nebuchadnezzar praised God, acknowledging His rulership over the affairs of men and His lordship over his own life (Daniel 4:34-37).

When all of God's warnings and judgments have been rejected, He has no choice but to remove His presence and protection entirely from the individual, allowing him to suffer the consequences of his own way of life. Sometimes the Lord actually arranges for the life of that person to be removed, because he has become a curse to himself and to other people. That was why he destroyed Pharaoh and his army as they were about to attack the Israelites. And it is why he took the lives of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram in an earthquake (Numbers 16:28-34). For the same reason he took the lives of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).

The Bible has much to say about the punishment of the wicked at the end of time (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9; 2 Peter 2:95 Revelation 14:11). The reason that God takes the lives of unrepentant people and puts them to death for eternity is clear from Scripture. The only way that He can have a perfect universe, free from violence, impurity, and dishonesty is to put to sleep those who refuse to acknowledge Him as their Lord and Savior. This is the very last thing that God wants to do. The Bible says that the Lord "is forbearing toward you, not willing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9 RSV). God is infinite, loving and merciful (1 John 4:8-9). That is why He sent His Son to die for our sins (John 3:16). He graciously draws all men to Himself (John 12:32), and with incredible patience and long-suffering endeavors to lead them to repentance (Romans 2:4), But if they reject all His divine efforts, there is nothing else that can be done to save them. The Lord has no choice but to remove them for eternity.

The Bible even teaches that at the end of time there are degrees of punishment for people who have chosen to live in sin. Some unrepentant sinners will suffer greater punishment than others (Luke 12:47-48). Every lost soul will be

punished in proportion to the knowledge of God's will that he has spurned. Those who have had much knowledge of divine truth and rejected it will suffer more than those who have had less knowledge.

In this lesson we study what happens after the close of probationary time to those who have not accepted Christ's love and sacrifice. In previous lessons we have learned that those who receive the mark of the beast near the end of time will be eternally lost. Now we shall discover that divine retribution begins to be poured out upon these people before the second coming of Jesus. As soon as the judgment has ended, and probation has closed (Revelation 22:11), the lost will be subjected to the seven last plagues. They are sent by God to counteract the destructive work of Satan in the world, and to convince the universe that the unrepentant cannot be changed in heart by any means. They only become more rebellious when they suffer.

We turn now to one of the most terrible stories in the Bible, and we pray as we do that lost men and women who read this lesson will turn in heart to Jesus as the only means of their salvation.

## Objectives

We shall study in turn each of the 7 last plagues referred to in Revelation chapter 16. And we shall note that the Lord plans to shelter His faithful people during that terrible time of trouble that is soon to come upon our world.

### I. The First Plague

There are literal and figurative aspects to John's description of the 7 last plagues. As we proceed, we will note what is obviously literal and what is obviously figurative. Some of the plagues must not be universal in extent, because, if they were, earth's inhabitants would be completely wiped out before the second coming of Jesus. We know that many of the lost are not put to death until the second advent (2 Thessalonians 1:8). Others of the plagues are obviously world-wide in application. The story begins with the close of probationary time at the end of the pre-advent judgment.

## The Word

1. Where do the seven last plagues come from? Whose displeasure results in the plagues being poured out? Revelation 15:1.
2. What vision did John receive of those who are sheltered from the plagues? Will they be on earth when the plagues are being poured out upon the lost? Revelation 15:2-4; 18:4; Daniel 12:1; (compare Revelation 3:10; 9:4),
3. What happens immediately before the plagues are poured out? Revelation 15:5-8.
4. What is the first plague? Who will suffer it? Revelation 16:1-2.

Explanation: The 7 last plagues will be brought to earth by the angels of heaven. They are an administration of the wrath of God upon those who have worshiped the beast and his image and received his mark. God's faithful people, who are sheltered at this terrible time of trouble, are on this earth, persecuted because of their rejection of the beast and his mark (Revelation 13:15-17), but not subject to the plagues that afflict the lost (Revelation 3:10; 18:4; Daniel 12:1).

Immediately before the plagues are administered, "the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven" is opened (Revelation 15:5). This is a sign of the end of the heavenly pre-advent judgment. The "tabernacle of the testimony" was the name given to the ancient Israelite sanctuary (Exodus 38:21; Numbers 1:50-53). The "testimony" was the law of God written on tables of stone that were kept in the ark in the Most Holy Place (Exodus 25:16). The ark represented the throne of God (Exodus 25:22). The Most Holy Place was opened only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:2). Leviticus 16 describes how the High Priest sprinkled blood in the Most Holy Place and then left the sanctuary and ministered in the court. After he had left the sanctuary (or temple) probation had closed for that religious year. The Israelite who had failed to put away his sin was rejected by God (Leviticus 23:29).

The books of Daniel and Revelation give the antitype of all this. At the beginning of the pre-advent judgment (the end~ time antitypical Day of Atonement) the temple was opened in heaven and the ark was seen in the Most Holy Place

(Revelation 11:19). This is why Daniel saw God upon the throne at the beginning of the judgment (Daniel 7:9). At the conclusion of the pre-advent judgment, Michael (Christ) leaves the temple (Daniel 12:1), the censer representing heavenly mediation is cast into the earth (Revelation 8:5), and the great proclamation goes forth that, from now on, the righteous will always be righteous and the wicked will always be wicked (Revelation 22:11).

The fact that John saw no one in the temple after it was opened (Revelation 15:8) proves that the judgment in the Most Holy Place of heaven is now finished. The cases of all human beings have been decided by the heavenly court, probation has closed, God's Spirit is finally withdrawn from the rebellious people of earth, and God is about to dispense retribution unmingled with mercy upon those who have rejected His love and truth. These are the ones who have chosen to follow the beast and his image, and to receive his mark (Revelation 14:10).

The first plague is "a noisome and grievous sore upon the men which had the mark of the beast, and upon them which worshiped his image" (Revelation 16:2). These people refused to believe in the everlasting Gospel (Revelation 14:6) and to receive the seal of God (Revelation 7:1-3). Now their eternal destiny is decided. They have identified themselves with Satan, and they are his forever. Christ did all He could to save them, but they would not respond.

Now they suffer a "sore," "abscess," "ulcer" (Greek = *helkos*). This symbolizes their degraded spiritual condition. The Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) uses the same word for the boils that afflicted the Egyptians in the time of Moses (Exodus 9:9-10).

Isaiah metaphorically depicted the diseased spiritual condition of the Israelites in his day. His description applies equally well to those who suffer the first plague: "Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. Why should ye be stricken anymore? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and petrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment" (Isaiah 1:4-6). The sores sent by God upon the lost will symbolize their spiritual disease and impurity.

Relevance: The Lord Jesus Christ wants every one of us to receive the gift of His righteousness by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 3:16-17). He asks us to worship him on His holy day (Revelation 14:7; Matthew 24:20), so that this terrible 'plague will not afflict us, and we will be His devoted children for eternity.

## II. The Second Plague

The second plague will disrupt international trade and travel.

The Word

### 5. Upon what was the second plague poured out? What happened? Revelation 16:3.

Explanation: Before the close of probation, the image to the beast (Apostate Protestantism in league with the Papacy) has prevailed upon secular governments to decree that those who reject the mark of the beast should not be permitted to buy or sell (Revelation 13:16-17). This creates great hardship for the people of God. Now the Lord responds by virtually bringing world commerce to a standstill. The adherents of the beast and his image will discover what it is like to be denied the necessities of life. When the Nile was turned to blood in Egypt in Moses' time (Exodus 7:19), the life support of the people was polluted. That event was an example of what will happen on a wider scale after the close of probation.

Relevance: Christians must love their enemies (Matthew 5:44). A vengeful spirit is totally contrary to the spirit of Jesus. Nevertheless, the Lord has said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12:19). Divine mercy is associated with divine justice. Mercy without justice would be a great weakness. God wants to punish no one. But when infinite love has been rejected, He brings retribution.

### III. The Third Plague

The third plague is similar to the second.

#### The Word

6. What happens under the third plague? Revelation 16:4.
7. What is the reason for the third plague? Revelation 16:5-7.

Explanation: In Scripture, rivers and fountains of waters sometimes represent the sources of truth and righteousness. (See Psalm 36:7-9). These have been polluted by the beast and his image. And they have persecuted those who have clung to Christ's truth and righteousness. Now God pollutes the literal rivers and fountains of waters as an outward sign of His displeasure at mankind's rejection of His truth and holiness, and their cruelty to the faithful servants of Christ. The symbolic significance of the literal plague is spelled out by a heavenly angel (Revelation 16:5-7). The adherents of the beast have shed innocent blood. Now God provides them with blood in abundant supply.

Relevance: Jesus said, "For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" (Matthew 7:2). It is a dangerous thing to dispense injustice to innocent people. God will see to it that those who do this will have their day of reckoning.

### IV. The Fourth Plague

The fourth plague brings great suffering upon rebellious humanity.

#### The Word

8. Upon what will the fourth plague be poured? What is the result? Revelation 16:8-9.

Explanation: In Scripture the sun sometimes symbolizes the true God (Psalm 84:11; 113:2-6; Malachi 4:2). In other places it symbolizes false gods (Deuteronomy 4:19; 17:3; 2 Kings 23:5, 11; Jeremiah 8:1-2; Ezekiel 8:16). Those who have chosen to receive the mark of the beast have elected to worship on Sunday. Sunday worship originated from the veneration of the sun. When pagans came into the early Christian Church, they brought their day of worship with them, trying to give it Christian significance in view of Christ rising from the dead on that day. The Lord says that the Sabbath is the sign of true worship (Exodus 31:13; Ezekiel 20:12). Those who have chosen the mark of the beast have chosen the wrong deity. Since the sun symbolizes their false god, the Lord allows the sun to plague them.

Relevance: Joshua invited the Israelites to choose whom they would serve, whether false gods or the true God. And he added, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15). Elijah challenged the people of his day, "How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 17:21). The issue facing us in these last days is very similar. If God is God, we must follow Him, if the beast, then we should follow him? It is clear who the true God is, and it is clear which day is the true sign of allegiance to Him. Then the only sensible thing is to follow the one and only true God.

### V. The Fifth Plague

The fifth plague strikes at the very heart of beast worship.

#### The Word

9. What part of the earth suffers under the fifth plague? What is the result? Revelation 16:10-11.

Explanation: The Greek original says that the fifth angel poured out his bowl upon "the throne of the beast" (Revelation 16:10). What is the throne of the beast? It represents the center of his government. Revelation 13:2 says that "the

dragon gave to him his power, and his throne, and great authority." We have seen that the dragon was primarily Satan (Revelation 12:9), but secondarily the pagan Roman Empire (Revelation 12:4). The Roman Empire, in effect, gave the center of its government (Rome) to the Papacy (See Lesson E-5). Rome is the throne of the beast, the center of his rule. Assuming that at the time of the plagues the Papacy is still centered in Rome, this will be the main area upon which the fifth plague will be meted out. But since the image to the beast has been set up prior to this in the United States (Revelation 13:14), it is very possible that the center of beast worship at this time will be this country.

Since the adherents of Papal worship have enveloped the world in almost universal spiritual darkness, the Lord reigns literal darkness down upon them.

Relevance: Jesus said, "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). Further He said, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life (John 8:12). But they have not followed Him. Multitudes will come up to the last great spiritual crisis for our world with no commitment to Christ. Isaiah's prophecy will be tragically fulfilled: "For, behold, the darkness "shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people (Isaiah 60:2). The latter part of that text will only apply to those who have received the seal of God: "...but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee."

## VI. The Sixth Plague

The sixth plague occurs very shortly before the second coming of Jesus. This plague marks the dissolution of the beast's world-wide religious empire.

### The Word

10. Where is the sixth plague poured out? What happens? What does this make possible? Revelation 16:12.
11. What work of Satan comes to an end when the sixth plague is poured out? Revelation 16:13-16.

Explanation: The allusion in Revelation 16:12 is to the literal river Euphrates that provided economic support for the ancient city of Babylon. The prophets predicted that this river of Babylon would be dried up (Isaiah 44:24 - 45:6; Jeremiah 50:38; 51:36-37). The fulfillment came in 539 B.C. when the Medo-Persian army diverted the waters of the Euphrates so that their troops could march up the riverbed and enter the city under the wall. Herodotus, the Greek historian (born between 490 and 480 B.C.), records that Queen Nitocris had built a huge basin near the Euphrates river, and at one time had diverted the water of the river into the basin, so that she could line with brick the banks of the river within the city of Babylon. In 539 B.C. Cyrus the Persian besieged Babylon but had no way to surmount the formidable wall. He placed troops either side of the city where the Euphrates entered under the wall and flowed out at the other side. Then he repeated Nitocris' operation of diverting the water of the river into the huge basin that she had built. This lowered the level of the water in the mainstream of the river, and his men were able to wade up the river and under the wall. [Herodotus, *The Histories*, translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt (Penguin "Books, 1954), pp. 87-91]. The rest of the story is told by Daniel chapter 5: "In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain" (verse 30). Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians, and the kings from the east now ruled the territory of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Cyrus and his Medo-Persian army were the literal kings from the east. Once Cyrus had conquered Neo-Babylonia, he passed a decree for the return of the Jews to their own land (Ezra 1). All of this provides the background to the Scriptural use of Cyrus as a type (or analogy) of the Messiah. (See Isaiah 41:2, 25; 46:11).

The river Euphrates in Revelation 16:12 symbolizes the life— support for modern antitypical "Babylon." Waters in Scripture often symbolize peoples, masses of humanity. Revelation 17:15 tells us that the waters of the Euphrates represent the peoples of earth who are supporting the "whore," modern "Babylon." The drying up of the Euphrates, therefore, must represent the peoples of earth withdrawing their support from antitypical "Babylon" just before the coming of Jesus. As we have discovered in previous lessons, modern "Babylon" is a symbol of the threefold false religious union of the last days: the Papacy, apostate Protestantism, and spiritism.

By the time of the sixth plague the masses of humanity who have given homage to "Babylon" are convinced that they have been deceived, and that they are fighting against God. They turn against their religious 'leaders and "Babylon" loses its popular support. Very soon after this is the coming of Jesus in the clouds of heaven with all His holy angels. These are the kings from the east. Christ is the antitypical Cyrus who comes to finally destroy "Babylon" and take His faithful people home to the promised land.

Before the metaphorical drying up of the Euphrates, evil spirits, working through spiritism (or paganism), the Papacy, and Apostate Protestantism, have deceived the greater number of the people on earth and prepared them for the final great conflict with the true God (Revelation 16:13–16). Although the people now withdraw their support from this threefold union ("Babylon"), they have made their eternal decision not to serve the Lord and keep holy His Sabbath as a sign of allegiance to Him. The next event will be the final great battle of human history (Armageddon). This is a conflict between the armies of heaven and the armies of earth. This occurs under the seventh plague. The sixth plague prepares for it; the event itself is the last act in the drama of the ages leading up to the second coming of Jesus. (See Revelation 17:14).

Relevance: How much better it is not to be deceived in the first place by false man-made religion, than to be deceived and come up to the end of history discovering that you are without a Savior, and with no hope of eternal life! When the people who have received the mark of the beast realize their mistake and withdraw their allegiance from "Babylon," it is too late to change sides. The Lord waited long and patiently but they did not respond to His loving appeals. As we consider their sad prospect, we can only join the Psalmist in exclaiming: "I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Psalm 84:10).

## VII. The Seventh Plague

The seventh plague describes the Lord's intervention on behalf of His beleaguered people at earth's darkness midnight. The events described by John under this plague are those that lead up to the coming of Jesus in the clouds of heaven.

### The Word

12. What great proclamation is sounded from heaven when this plague is poured out? Revelation 16:17.
13. What events then occur? Revelation 16:18-21.
14. What is the great finale that brings all this suffering to an end? Revelation 19:11-21.
15. What happens then to Christ's living believers who have the seal of God upon them? 1 Thessalonians 4: John 14:1-3,

Explanation: Just as "Babylon" is losing its popular support, and the people are furiously blaming their religious leaders for deceiving them, God intervenes from heaven to bring the whole ugly drama to a close. He pronounces, "It is done!" That means that the conflict is over and Jesus is about to come. Then come a series of natural upheavals that reduce the world to a state of chaos. There is a terrible storm, in which hailstones weighing about 66 pounds crash to earth, smashing buildings and destroying cities, followed by a devastating earthquake in which islands and mountains disappear. "Babylon" is finally divided, never again to be a tool of Satan to deceive and destroy. But lost men curse God and blame everyone but themselves for their hopeless predicament.

In the midst of the confusion and destruction, there comes a piercing gleam in the eastern sky. Before long the heavens are filled with glory, and the saved look up with rapturous joy as they see their Lord coming to deliver them from the misery of a perishing world. Graves are burst open, and those who died believing are brought forth and caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Then the living saints are caught up to be with them, and together they are taken triumphantly to the courts of heavenly glory.

Relevance: Dear soul, the great controversy between Christ and Satan will end on a note of thrilling victory for the people of God. Jesus promised to return and take us to His heavenly home. You do not have to pass through the agony of the seven last plagues. Salvation is yours today if you reach out for Jesus and receive His love and His truth. The blessings

you will be given now and later are unsurpassed by anything this old world has to offer. Won't you come to Him now in humble surrender? Jesus is waiting with outstretched arms to receive you as His child for eternity!

#### Review Questions

1. True or False
  - a. All the plagues are universal.
  - b. There is nothing literal about the plagues.
  - c. The drying up of the Euphrates is a prophetic symbol.
  - d. There is no second chance for anyone after the close of probation.
2. Discuss: The real battle between good and evil is going on in every person's mind. If Satan can gain control of our minds, he can destroy our love for God and His truth. If we are to have the seal of God upon our foreheads, our minds must be entirely given over to the influence of the Holy Spirit.