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 Revelation 16:1-21  
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# SHOWDOWN AT ARMAGEDDON

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

Armageddon. A word that evokes fear or fascination. A word that has entered the English language as a metaphor for catastrophic conflict. A word that shows up in headlines, in the titles of books and movies, in the names of hot sauces and pest control products. A Google search of “Armageddon” yesterday yielded 21 million hits!

Are we in the countdown to Armageddon? The events of the past few weeks have been troubling. Some of the rockets that Hezbollah has been firing into Israel have fallen very close to the supposed site of Armageddon. The exposure this past week in Britain of another plot to blow up airplanes has again confronted us with the terrorist threat. Will these mujahideen, these Islamic jihadists, drag the West into Armageddon?

The two most famous features of the book of Revelation are the number 666 and the name Armageddon. Both have captured the public imagination, while also unsettling it. Given the great amount of material written about 666 and Armageddon, it may surprise you to know that each is mentioned only once in Revelation, indeed in all of Scripture, and that no explanation is given of either term. This lack of data hasn't prevented great speculation. Despite the lack of data, and the wide variety of interpretations, it is clear that John expected his readers to understand the number and the name. Both are given in the context of pastoral counsel to the saints. The number 666 is given in the context of a call for wisdom (13:18). The name Armageddon is given in the context of a promise from Jesus.

Today we will try to make sense of Armageddon as we come to chapter 16, the pouring out of the seven bowls.

## A. The Bowls of God's Wrath

**Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, “Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth.” (Rev 16:1 NIV)**

The seven bowls follow the seven seals and the seven trumpets as the third and final set of divine judgments. The three sets of sevens exhibit both similarities and differences. The most notable difference is the escalation in intensity: the seals affected a quarter of the earth, the trumpets affected a third of the earth, the bowls affect all of the earth. But this difference serves to heighten the correspondence between the three sets. It is this correspondence that persuades me to view these three series as three variations upon the one common theme of divine judgment. Given that the narrative sequence of Revelation is a series of visions, rather than the things seen in the visions, there is no need for the seven seals to be followed chronologically by the seven trumpets then the seven bowls. All three sets of seven portray God's judgments upon rebellious humanity, judgments which have been displayed, are being displayed, and will be displayed.

## B. The Plagues

**The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image.**

**The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea died.**

**The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood.**

**Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say:**

**“You are just in these judgments,  
 you who are and who were, the Holy One,  
 because you have so judged;  
 for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets,  
 and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.”**

**And I heard the altar respond:**

**“Yes, Lord God Almighty,  
 true and just are your judgments.”**

**The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him.**

**The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done. (16:2-11)**

The first four bowls, like the first four trumpets, affect the four realms of the cosmos: the earth, the sea, the fresh waters and the heavenly bodies. Four is the number of universality. When God acts, there is no place where his enemies can hide. There is no place to which God will not extend his judgment. There is no place that God will not rid of evil in order to renew his cosmos, in which all is holy.

Also like the trumpets, the bowls are modeled on the plagues with which God struck Pharaoh in Egypt. Indeed the divine judgments that the seven angels pour out of their bowls are specifically called plagues (15:1, 5). In Egypt Pharaoh was regarded as divine, claiming status that belonged to God alone. Furthermore, he held God's people captive, oppressing them in cruel bondage. Despite repeated calls from God through his prophet Moses to let his people go so that they might worship him, Pharaoh refused to do so. Therefore God struck him and his people with plagues to show all parties that he alone was God. They were acts of judgment upon one who set himself up against God and upon those who formed his kingdom.

They were also the prelude to the great act that would simultaneously defeat Pharaoh and his armies while delivering God's people.

The Egyptians had been deceived into worshiping Pharaoh as divine. In John's visions the earth-dwellers have been deceived into worshiping the beast. Both Pharaoh and the beast were granted their throne by Satan, but since Satan is not the sovereign of the universe, he and they are imposters, counterfeit, not fit to be worshiped. In the first five bowls God strikes at the beast's kingdom and people just as he had struck at Pharaoh's kingdom and people. It is the worshipers of the beast who are afflicted by the boils of the first bowl and by the scorching heat of the fourth bowl; it is they who writhe in pain when the beast's kingdom is plunged into darkness by the fifth bowl.

Just as the plagues in Egypt were both judgments upon and warnings to Pharaoh, calling him to repent and acknowledge the one true God, so are these plagues poured out of the bowls. But the worshipers of the beast refuse to heed God's warnings. After the fourth, fifth and seventh bowls we see that mankind refuses to repent, but continues to blaspheme God. The sixth trumpet evoked the same response. Though God's judgments work salvation, they do not themselves bring about repentance. Instead, what draws people to repentance is the faithful witness of the saints to Christ, who is himself the faithful witness to God.

Two heavenly voices break into the vision of the third bowl. An angel praises God for the justice of his judgments, acclaiming him as "you who are and who were, the Holy One." A common title for God in this book is "the one who is, and who was, and who is to come" (1:4, 8; 4:8). The angel omits the third part, for at this moment God has come in judgment. Instead he is hailed as "the Holy One." It is his holiness, the fact that he is altogether other, that gives God the authority to judge. He is the Creator; all else is created. He therefore has the right to execute judgment on creatures that rebel against him. The offense for which God judges the people here is hostility to his own people. Again there is poetic justice. They have poured out the saints' blood as if from a cup. In turn God gives them his cup of blood to drink; his cup contains his wrath which spills out their blood. The oppressors of God's people have brought this upon their own heads: judgment is what they deserve. Literally, they are "worthy."

"Worthy" is one of those words that is used exactly seven times in the book. Who is worthy of what? As Creator, God is worthy of all praise and worship (4:11). The Lamb is worthy to open the sealed scroll because he has been slain (5:9); this is the turning point of history. The slain Lamb is therefore also worthy of praise and worship (5:12). He is worthy of the same worship as God without contradicting the call to worship God alone.

We do not live in an honor-shame culture. Instead we live in a culture obsessed with self-worth. It can therefore be hard for us to grasp the significance of worthiness. The first readers of Revelation would have been considered unworthy by surrounding society. They refused to participate in the idolatrous practices of society. One of the purposes of this book is to reinforce the saints' understanding of who is worthy and why. God and the Lamb are worthy of worship: God as Creator, the Lamb as Redeemer. The dragon and the beast are not worthy of worship; those who worship them are deceived. Though the saints be judged unworthy by the world, if they just hold onto Jesus, he will judge them worthy. Jesus tells the faithful saints in Sardis that they are worthy of wearing white garments (3:4). Their worth lies not in themselves, but in the Lamb to whom they bear

faithful witness. Conversely, those who judge them unworthy in this world will themselves be found worthy of judgment.

"Yes," affirms the altar—the altar on which the prayers of the saints had been offered up to God (8:3), the altar from which the censer had been filled with fire and hurled to the earth (8:5). In his judgments God vindicates both himself and his people. Since he is holy, he vindicates himself by removing that which is not holy from his world. In doing so, he shows his righteousness. But God shows his righteousness in such a way as to bring about salvation. He vindicates his people when he judges those who oppress them. He thereby shows that it is his people not their oppressors who are in the right, who are worthy.

### C. Armageddon

**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. Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.**

**"Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed."**

**Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon. (16:12-16)**

The similarity between the trumpets and the bowls is seen again in the sixth of each series. The blowing of the sixth trumpet released two myriad myriad troops who had been held back at the River Euphrates (9:14-16). The sixth bowl causes the Euphrates to dry up, opening the way for the kings of the east.

The Euphrates is over 1700 miles long, forming one of the great natural borders of the ancient world. From Old Testament Israel's perspective, beyond the Euphrates lay her enemies Assyria and Babylon. From Rome's perspective, beyond the Euphrates lay her great nemesis, Parthia. The drying up of the river prepares the way for invasion by God's instruments of judgment. But there is more. The Euphrates flowed through the center of Babylon. Through his prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah the Lord announced that he would dry up Babylon's waters as a prelude to her fall. The drying up of the Euphrates therefore signals that the fall of Babylon is at hand.

John sees three demonic spirits looking like frogs, another echo of the plagues in Egypt. These spirits originate in the counterfeit trinity: the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. Empowered by this Satanic troika, the spirits gather the kings of the earth to a great battle. We are told both the time and the place of this battle: it will occur on the great day of God Almighty and at a place called Armageddon.

The great day of God Almighty is the day when God accomplishes both judgment and salvation. Israel of old thought that this day of the Lord announced by the prophets would be a single event when God would set everything right. God did set things right: he raised up his messiah Cyrus to fell Babylon and release his people from captivity. But it became evident that more was needed. The battle on the day of the Lord took place again on the cross: through his Messiah Jesus, God brought judgment upon sin, death and Satan, liberat-

ing his people from a greater captivity. But it is evident that neither judgment nor salvation is yet complete. We await the day when God will bring final judgment on his enemies, and will thus complete the salvation of his people and of the world he has made.

The site of this final battle is Armageddon. This Hebrew name written in Greek characters has become one of the most famous names of all time. But what does it mean and where is it? The standard interpretation of this name is *Har-Megiddo*, the mount or hill of Megiddo.

Megiddo was a strategic city in ancient Israel; it is now a well-excavated ruin. The city lay on the coastal highway that was the main route between Egypt in the south and Anatolia and Mesopotamia in the north. At Megiddo this highway emerged from a narrow ravine onto the Jezreel Plain. Over the past 3500 years many strategic battles have been fought here. Since Megiddo itself does not sit on a mountain, perhaps the Hill of Megiddo refers to the tell, the mound of rubble on which the ancient city sat, or to Mount Carmel which lies behind the site. The “standard” interpretation is that an army of 200 million will sweep across the Euphrates from the east and gather at Megiddo for a final climactic battle with God’s people.

But there is another way of understanding the name Armageddon, one which I think makes better sense of the context. Armageddon can be read as *Har-Mo’ed*, the Mount of Assembly. John provides a clue in his choice of verb: Armageddon is the place where the demonic spirits gather or assemble the kings of the earth for battle. Interpreting the name as Mount of Assembly fits the context of this gathering for war. It also allows a connection to be drawn with an Old Testament passage celebrating the fall of the king of Babylon:

**How you have fallen from heaven,  
O morning star, son of the dawn!  
You have been cast down to the earth,  
you who once laid low the nations!  
You said in your heart,  
“I will ascend to heaven;  
I will raise my throne  
above the stars of God;  
I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,  
on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.  
I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;  
I will make myself like the Most High.”  
But you are brought down to the grave,  
to the depths of the pit. (Isa 14:12-15)**

The sin of the king of Babylon was to aspire to be like God. He desired to “sit enthroned on the mount of assembly.” We don’t know which king this taunt song was directed at, but this attitude was true of all the kings of Babylon and Assyria, as it had been true earlier of Pharaoh, as it would be true later of the Roman emperors. This attitude was true also of the empires represented by those rulers: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome. They aspired to the utmost heights but were thrown down to the utmost depths. Behind all these rulers and empires lurks Satan whose behavior they mimic. Satan aspired to be like God but has been thrown out of heaven. His home now is the Abyss, the antipode of heaven. But his fall is not yet complete: the great day of the Lord is coming when Satan will be thrown down to the utmost depths, down to the lake of fire, whence he can never again rise.

The Mount of Assembly is the place where God sits enthroned with his court. This court consists of heavenly beings: the cherubim,

elders and angels that we see assembled around the throne worshipping God. To this court God is also adding earthly beings, humans redeemed by the Lamb. Here on Mount Zion he has installed the Lamb as his King. Here are assembled the 144,000 who follow the Lamb (14:1). Satan’s assault on the Mount of Assembly is therefore an assault against the Lamb and his followers.

Interpreting Armageddon this way provides a better fit with the other depictions of this battle. In chapter 17 it’s the ten kings, sharing the beast’s power, who make war against the Lamb and his followers (17:14). In chapter 19 it’s the beast, the kings of the earth and their armies who gather to battle against the rider on the horse and his army (19:19). In chapter 20 it’s the dragon Satan who gathers the nations to battle against God’s people (20:7-9). To quote D. A. Carson’s hymn that was sung as our offertory, “The enemy is fearsome; His fury terrifies.”<sup>1</sup> He looks all-powerful. That’s why both dragon and beast are portrayed with seven heads and ten horns (12:3; 13:1). But, but, but! “[B]ut the Lamb will overcome them because he is King of kings and Lord of lords” (17:14). “But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet...The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur” (19:20). “But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil...was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur” (20:9-10). As soon as battle is joined, it’s over!

Are these four separate last battles or are they all the same battle? I think they are all the same battle, a battle that has taken place, is taking place, and will take place. Satan constantly wages war against the Lamb and his people; that’s his *modus operandi*. The Lamb has defeated Satan in his death, resurrection and exaltation; the Lamb is continuing to defeat Satan in his assaults on the church; and the time is coming when the defeat shall be complete. What will this final battle look like? I have no idea, but the last thing I expect is a pitched battle at Megiddo.

“Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?” had asked the worshipers of the dragon and the beast (13:4). If you look just in the seen world, then the presumed answer is “no one.” But John sees into heaven, into the unseen world; there he sees the rider on the white horse, the divine warrior, Jesus. “With justice he judges and makes war” (19:11).

Who can oppose the beast? Jesus, whom God has appointed King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus has defeated Satan and his beastly helpers by doing the exact opposite of Satan. Satan aspired to be like God, to be seated in the utmost heights, but was cast down to the utmost depths. Jesus laid aside his equality with God, humbling himself as a servant, obedient even to death on a cross. Wherefore God has exalted him to the highest place (Phil 2:6-11).

There you have it in a nutshell: the grasping pride of Satan versus the self-giving humility of Christ. That is the fundamental conflict in the world. But the battle has already been won. God has judged the pride of Satan and vindicated the humility of his Son. Indeed it is precisely the humiliation of his Son that he has used to judge the pride of Satan. The world is no longer ruled by tyranny, by deception, by “might is right.” The kingdom of this world has fallen, is falling and must fall, to be replaced by the kingdom of God, who gives his own Son to buy back rebels at such cost.

Revelation is a pastoral book, a letter written by John to help churches in their daily lives. Just as John gave the number 666 within a piece of pastoral advice, so he does with the name Armageddon. Verse 16 could follow verse 14 as a continuation of the same sentence,



but into the middle of this sentence John has embedded verse 15. It is a word of pastoral counsel from Jesus himself.

“Behold, I come like a thief!” says Jesus, repeating the counsel that he gave to the church in Sardis (3:3). Repeatedly in this book Jesus tells his people, “I am coming”—seven times using this word, three times using a synonym, for a total of ten. He follows this with a beatitude, the third of seven in the book: “Blessed is he who stays awake” or the one who is watchful. Watchful for what? Watchful not for Armageddon but for the return of Jesus. In the countdown to Armageddon the forces of evil look strong, but our gaze is to be not on them but on the Lamb, for it is he who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

If by the time you get to the end of Revelation, you are still trying to figure out 666 and Armageddon, you have totally missed the point of the book: your gaze is on the beast not on the Lamb. The book ends with Jesus again saying, “I am coming soon” to which John responds, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20).

#### D. It is done!

**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 done!” Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. 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. Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible. (16:17-21)**

Before any battle of Armageddon is even fought, the seventh angel pours out his bowl. A cry of triumph comes from the throne, from God himself: “It is done!” It has happened! Lightning, thunder, and an earthquake announce the arrival of God, his appearance in awesome majesty. These phenomena accompanied God’s appearance to his people at Mount Sinai (Exod 19:16-19). With ever-increasing intensity they have accompanied the manifestation of his presence in heaven (4:5) and the manifestation of his judgment in the seventh seal (8:5), the seventh trumpet (11:19), and now the seventh bowl (16:18). The great earthquake brings the collapse of Babylon, the great city, and of all the cities of the nations. Babylon must fall to make way for the New Jerusalem.

So we come to the end of the central section of the book, chapters 4–16. The section began with John being summoned up to heaven, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this” (4:1). It ends with the triumphant cry from God, “It is done!” The things which must take place have taken place. What has happened? The fall of the kingdom of this world. This is what the seventh trumpet had announced: “The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (11:15). This must happen because God is on his throne, as seen in the first vision of the section (chapter 4). The way it happens is through the triumph of the Lamb, as seen in the second vision of the section (chapter 5). I hope you have noticed how often we keep coming back to these two chapters. They are the most important chapters in the book. God is on his throne, and there enthroned beside him is the slain but victorious Lamb. Everything hinges on these two chapters.

The remaining six chapters (17–22) are a tale of two cities, portraying the fall of Babylon and the descent from heaven of the New Jerusalem. The great city falls to make way for the holy city. The world city falls to make way for the heavenly city. The harlot falls to make way for the bride. The kingdom of this world falls to make way for the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.

The cry, “It is done!” heralds the fall of Babylon. The same cry, “It is done!” heralds the descent of the New Jerusalem (21:6). The fall of Babylon is only half of the story, the judgment side. God has yet to complete salvation with the arrival of the New Jerusalem. When God cries, “It is done!” for the second time, he also declares, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (21:3).

To which all God’s people say, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

*Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. (2 Cor 2:14)*

1. D. A. Carson, “The Kingdom of our God,” in *Shout With Delight: New Songs for the People of God, Volume 1* (Trenton, Mich.: Christway Media, 2000).

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