**Revelation 15-16 Choices have consequences!**

**Introduction**

Our choices have consequences! It is a statement of the obvious, but at times we need to remind ourselves that the choices we make do shape and impact events in the present and future years of our lives. It can be positive choices. Gary Player, the well-known South African golfer once remarked the more I practice the luckier I get [on the golf course]. There is no doubt that he was one of the best players of his generation. However, he worked incredibly hard to do everything he could to increase the odds of a successful round of golf when he stepped on the course to compete against his peers. You can give numerous examples of similar practice. A musician who puts on a magnificent performance on their instrument in the concert venue has put in hours of practice over a long period of time so that by the time they go on stage they already have mastered the music they will play. The work they have done, the choices they have made have good consequences for not only themselves, but also for the enjoyment of the audience who have gathered to experience the performance. Yet it is equally true that bad or inappropriate choices also have consequences. There are many sad stories of people who smoked or had drunk alcohol or took various types of non-prescribed drugs to cope with the stresses of their lives or to mask the pain of things they had experienced and ended up addicted to the substance they had though would alleviate their suffering or ease their struggles. It might be easy for an outsider to say with hindsight that what happened to them was all too predictable, but the person themselves had not expected that outcome until it was all too apparent.

 The events described in Revelation 15-16 are altogether more serious, but the principle is the same. The examples above are close up accounts of individual choices, but the choices of nations also have consequences. We live in an era of individualism where the assumption is made that each person alone should gain the rewards or take the punishment of their actions. But this perspective on life common in Western Europe since the eighteenth century was very different to the worldviews of people in earlier generations and in different cultural contexts. They had a perspective of family or clan, tribe or nation, in it together for good or ill. We need to remember that although we have a roof over our heads and live in a country where there is enough food to go round and for our basic needs to be met – or should be the case if resources are shared appropriately, life in the ancient world was much more difficult. There were no guarantees available and you needed to stick together to try and make ends meet. So we must remember this bigger picture or perspective that would have been common in previous millennia. These chapters of Revelation indicate to us that the punishment of the wicked is not reserved exclusively for the Day of Judgement, but even in this life our choices have consequences that must be acknowledged.

1. **The principle of God’s judgement** (Revelation15)

The book of Revelation covers events from the first coming of Jesus as the servant king to the second coming of Jesus in glory to reign as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It began with an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus in the slate quarries of the island of Patmos off the west coast of Turkey. The man of God, John who had that vision was humanly speaking powerless. He was a prisoner of the most powerful empire of the day in that part of the world. The messages were for the small communities of followers of Jesus located in the cities and towns on the nearby mainland. There were specific short messages tailored for each of these congregations in their particular circumstances, prior to a series of similar visions whose messages were not only for them but also later for other Christian Churches down the centuries. Revelation 4-7 reminded us that they would endure hardship and persecution but they would persevere and be united with their Lord and Saviour in glory. The vision in Revelation 8-11 served as a reminder that God’s judgement would fall on the wicked, who oppose God and refuse to repent of their attitudes and choices, but their choices would not stop God’s purposes coming to pass. This conflict between the Church and Satan, between good and evil, between ‘the seed of the woman’ and ‘the evil one’ was also a spiritual battle in the heavenly places (Revelation12-14) where Satan and the fallen angels once again were defeated. It raises the inevitable question what happens to the wicked that consistently and persistently defy God and refuse to repent of their evil ways. Are there consequences in this life or is the judgement of God also in evidence in this life? In Revelation15-16 we have an indication that our choices have consequences in this life and that nations that collectively act in ways that go against God’s plans for humanity may reap some of the harvest of their choices in this life, not only as individuals in eternity. God is very patient, but it is not limitless. In II Chronicles 36:16, in the years prior to the exile to Babylon, this was demonstrated with respect to the Old Testament people of God: *But they mocked God’s messengers, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against His people and* ***there was no remedy****.* Exile in Babylon was inevitable as the prophet Jeremiah had proclaimed - with tears. In the New Testament era the offer of the good news of the gospel is not forever. In II Corinthians 6:2, Paul wrote: *As God’s fellow workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain.****2****For He says, ‘In the time of My favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.’ I tell you,* ***now*** *is the time of God’s favour,* ***now*** *is the day of salvation.* Have you responded to His divine invitation and received the good news of salvation? It will not be available for ever.

The visions of the bowls in Revelation15-16 is similar to that in the vision of the trumpets in Revelation 8-11. Trumpet signals in the ancient world were a message warning of danger to be averted. The contents of the bowls, though, are poured out and cannot be regathered into those containers. For whom are the judgements meted out in our two chapters? They are for the people who have ‘the mark of the beast’ (Revelation 13), that is they have deliberately and consciously set themselves against God and His people and the consequences of their choices will in time become apparent. The messages of each vision given to John are similar with only a slight change of emphasis – here it is on the consequences of rejecting God and of oppressing His people throughout history. This description of the last days prior to the final judgement is a reminder that our amazing loving and gracious God is also a God of justice and the choice to reject Him and the good news He offers has inevitable consequences. Behind this vision of the future is an example from the past that will illustrate what has been communicated to John here for the future. This illustration comes from the time of Moses and the exodus from Egypt.

2. **An illustration of God’s judgement** (Exodus 14-15)

*They held harps given them by God****3****and sang the song of God’s servant Moses* (Revelation15:2b-3a)

*I saw in heaven another great and marvellous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues – last, because with them God’s wrath is completed.****2****And I saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and its image and over the number of its name. They held harps given them by God****3****and sang the song of God’s servant Moses and of the Lamb:* The first scene in Revelation 15 is of the victorious people of God in heaven. They are rejoicing in the victory of God over evil and the evil one and those who have supported his wicked cause. In their timeless context of eternity, the victory is already now! Yet on earth it is certain but ‘not yet’, but God’s promises are guaranteed for the future and as certain as if they were events that had taken place in the past. Here on earth we only ever see a part of the bigger picture. The Song of Moses and the event it celebrated is a picture of the power of our Almighty God and His triumph over earthly rulers and empires that defy Him. The Victory is His in each era of history for the good of His people. Our God reigns! Let us give Him all the glory and praise. *The sea of glass glowing with fire* (Rev.15:2a) is a picture of God’s transparent righteousness revealed in the judgement of those who stand against Him, and often against Him by opposing or persecuting His people. What is the intended purpose of God acting in this way? Revelation15:4 gives the answer: *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.’* It is so that… *All nations will come and worship before You…* We pray for God to act in history and answer our prayers, not primarily to make life easier or better for ourselves, but so that He might receive more and greater honour and praise. What happened in Exodus 14 that led to that overflowing of praise and worship in the song of Moses?

The Israelites have been enslaved for around four centuries. No-one alive in their midst has any memory of the privilege and responsibilities of living in a few society. God has miraculously demonstrated His power to the Pharaoh by the ten plagues which were in effect a demonstration that He was greater than the gods of the Egyptians and over Pharaoh, who claimed divine powers in the land. It was a humiliation for Pharaoh to let these people go. More than two million people, adults and children, have taken what they possessed and started out on the journey to freedom. But how will such a multitude obtain the basic supplies of food and water as they travel through the desert? The euphoria of liberation would quickly decrease as unanswered questions increased in number. If that was not enough to be concerned about, how could they defend themselves against the armies of other people in or through whose lands they wished to travel? Their vulnerability became evident extremely quickly as report as emerged of the impending arrival of the cavalry regiment, and possibly foot soldiers as well, sent by Pharaoh to force them back to Egypt. The day came when their worst nightmare came true. Behind them was the waters of the Red Sea and in front in the desert were the Egyptian Army. They had very few weapons that were of limited use against trained soldiers. Their future looked bleak. Moses cried out to the Lord for help. Exodus 14:13-18 contains some remarkable information: ***13****Moses answered the people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again.****14****The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.’*

***15****Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the Israelites to move on.****16****Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground.****17****I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen.****18****The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen.’* What do we see here?

**1.** Moses without knowing how God will deliver them gives public testimony of His confidence in God before the people. He declares: *The Lord will fight for you...* The things outside their control, he declared, have to be entrusted to God. Do you and I need to be reminded of that truth? Is there a situation or are there situations beyond our control that we are worried about today? Moses reminds us to entrust these things to God.

**2.** God reminds Moses that there were things they could do in this situation! *Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the Israelites to move on.*There are times for prayer and times for action! We can mix them up at times, or even worse, neither praying seriously nor taking the action required to put ourselves in the place of blessing. The walking required of the Israelites was out into the Red Sea with an expectation that God would make away for them. It can be hard to discern sometimes whether faith steps are required to seize an opportunity, or whether caution is wise to avoid potential calamity. The solemn challenge here is that sometimes the people of God miss out on His blessings because of over caution and a failure to grasp His provision for our needs. We need to pray for clarity in times of decision, that He will guide us to make right choices. Is there a choice personally or collectively we need to make today or in the near future?

**3**. The reason why this was the right step to take. *The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord****when I gain glory*** *through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen.* In our prayers, to ask the Lord, in my life personally or in my work; in my marriage or my family or in the business of our church family, will the proposal I or we are considering be to Your honour or greater glory? There is no simple answer in most situations to such a question. God in His sovereignty has not chosen to message us with the correct option in these times of decision. But if this is sincerely our hearts desire to glorify Him in the choices we make then it is more likely that we will be inclined to better choices. The waters parted, the people crossed over the Red Sea with all their possessions while the Egyptians watched on at the sight before them. Then, when the Egyptian cavalry was ordered to pursue the Israelites they partially crossed the sea before the waters returned to consume them and the Israelites were free.

The Song of Moses in Exodus 15 was an outpouring of praise at His deliverance. *‘I will sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted* (Exodus 15:1); *The Lord is my strength and my defence; He has become my salvation* (15:2); *The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is His name* (15:3); *Your right hand, Lord, was majestic in power. Your right hand, Lord, shattered the enemy* (15:6);

**4.** What are the conclusions for the future? *Who among the gods   is like you, Lord? Who is like You – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?* (Rev. 15:11) The clear answer is that there is no-one comparable to the Lord! He alone is a waymaker in the most unlikely places. He did it once? What did Isaiah prophesy concerning the exiles in Babylon? Isaiah 40: *A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.* ***4****Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.* ***5****And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’* Was a way found for the exiles to return from Babylon? Absolutely? What can we conclude for the future *‘Here is your God!’* ***10****See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and He rules with a mighty arm. See, His reward is with Him, and His recompense accompanies Him* (Isaiah 40:9b-10). Our God reigns! This is the backdrop to Revelation 15-16, that there are no impossible situations for God to work in! We do not put all our trust in politicians or other rulers, nor do we fall into utter despair when unsuitable ones gain power.

3. **The future prospect of God’s judgement** (Revelation 15)

The transparency of God’s righteous judgement of the wicked causes the people of God to rejoice that those who do evil are held to account and are punished appropriate for their misdeeds. They are pictured as celebrating that God has taken this course of action. *‘Great and marvellous are Your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are Your ways, King of the nations.* ***4****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.’* (Revelation15:3b-4) This is very important to note that God will one guarantee justice is done. It is not our place to take revenge. Paul spelt that out in Romans 12:17-21:*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.****18****If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.****19****Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.****20****On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’****21****Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* Here are pictured people who have followed this biblical guidance and who now have grounds for great rejoicing that God has taken care of ensuring justice is served appropriately. Grasping this truth, I believe, might be most helpful to us when we are struggling to accept that someone appears to have got away with behaving badly or intentionally causing harm to the interests of another person or people. Only God knows the thoughts of people’s hearts and minds and will judge appropriately. Verses 5-8 have the backdrop of the Ark of the Covenant as the background ‘picture’. God’s moral standards for His people are the boundary markers for our lives. The Ten Commandments are easy to recite, but can be difficult to practice at times. The angels carrying the wrath of God in its symbolic form appear out of the Temple in John’s vision. That is, their actions of judgement are in line with the holy standards of God. The impression is given solemnly and clearly that the day of intercessions was over. Those who had wilfully rejected God would face the consequences of their actions.

4. **The seven bowls of wrath** (Revelation16)

Revelation 16 in visual and symbolic form pictures the judgement of God against wicked people wherever they may be found on the land or in the seas- in other words , that there will be no hiding place from facing the consequences of choices they have made to wilfully oppose God and oppress His people. The emphasis in the chapter is on the just deserts being given to those who were devoted to ‘the beast’ and his cause. John in this vision heard the angelic cry: *‘****You are just in these judgments****, O Holy One, you who are and who were;* ***6****for they have shed the blood of Your holy people and Your prophets, and You have given them blood to drink as they deserve.’* ***7****And I heard the altar respond: ‘Yes, Lord God Almighty,****true and just are your judgments****.’*(Revelation 16:5b-7) For those of us who have never experienced live warfare and witnessed the terrible carnage that can be found in such settings, we can be deeply uncomfortable reading or visualising images of judgement, even when it is justly apportioned to those who have wilfully committed acts of great evil. It is only a few weeks ago on Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day that we honoured those who served and suffered in our place as a nation that we might enjoy the blessings of the costly freedoms they secured for us. We long to experience the life God planned for humanity when He created this world, free from suffering and violence and evil. This is of course what we should desire as people created in the image of God. In a small way, in our daily lives, we can model a counter-cultural way of living through showing love and care to those we encounter. Over the many centuries of human history there have been numerous occasions when choices have been made in wilful defiance of the desires of our Creator and Redeemer. In this vision, we are solemnly reminded that choices have consequences. In this case, it is the evil choices of those who shake their fist at Almighty God and defy His call for a godly way of living individually and together collectively as nations or empires. The prophets throughout the Old Testament warned of the inevitable judgement of God on nations and empires that turned their backs on Him and His standards. Yet the mercy and graciousness of God in tempering judgement is misunderstood and ignored by those who defy the Lord. At different times in history, God’s judgment has fallen on nations and empires that will one day culminate in a final earthly judgement at a place called Armageddon. The Bible does not give any details of what that entails, but it will be the final defeat on earth at the end of the age of those forces fanatically opposed to God and His plans for His creation. It will be a final reminder of the Day of Judgement that will be experienced by them at the end of the Age. In Revelation16:17, a loud voice from heaven declared: *’It is done’.* On the cross, two thousand years ago, before He laid down His life Jesus shouted out: It is *finished* (John 19:30). The devil had been defeated. The work of redemption reconciling us to God and God to us had been accomplished. Here at the end of the age, time is called on human wickedness and evil. God’s people are observers not participants in these scenes of judgement. In our world we see and hear what seems like endless accounts of man’s inhumanity to fellow human beings. We cry out: ‘Lord, how long must it continue! The vision in Revelation 15-16 reminds us that it is time limited and soon God will call time on this world bringing to an end the things that cause anguish to our hearts. We say: ‘Come soon Lord Jesus! We long to experience the new Creation that You have prepared for us, Amen.

**Questions for Reflection**:

Q1. Are there events happening in the world just now that cause you to be angry or sad? These chapters remind us that God is active in punishing evildoers.

Q2. How reassuring do you find this reminder that those who do evil will be held to account? They will not evade justice.

**Song for Reflection**: ‘Our eyes have seen the glory’<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Ic4w_UEpCQ>