Revelation Study 5
The Seven Bowls

Read: Rev 15:1-19:10

Structure
If the first cycle of 7's (seals) had to do with past events, and the second cycle (trumpets) with current events, then this final cycle of 7 bowls has to do with the future final judgment of God. In 15:1 we are introduced to the idea of God's final judgment, but then immediately we are told that all the faithful who had conquered the beast are already standing before God. In other words the final judgment will not touch them but is reserved for the ungodly. In 15:1-16:21 the 7 bowls of God's wrath are described, but then the 7th bowl is elaborated as the final destruction of Babylon in 17:1-19:10, thus including these additional chapters into the cycle of the bowls.

The structure of this section can be summarised as follows:

15:1-16:1	Preparations in heaven for the 7 bowls
16:2 – 21	The Seven Bowls
17:1-18	The Harlot and the Beast
18:1-24	The Fall of Babylon
19:1-10	Songs of Praise

15:1-16:1 Preparations in heaven for the 7 bowls
God's final judgment is coming, but it will not affect God's faithful ones who stand beside the crystal sea, having overcome the beast and its image and its number. Their song of praise is called the "Song of Moses and of the Lamb." The Song of Moses (Exodus 15:1-8) recalled God saving His people at the Exodus. Now again God is being praised for saving His people.

The bowls of plagues are the answer to the prayers of the saints for justice. John's readers are warned not to become followers of the beast, lest they also experience God's final judgments.

16:2 – 21 The Seven Bowls
As with the seals and trumpets, there is a basic 4 + 3 structure to the 7 bowls. The first 4 plagues affect the earth and its heavenly bodies, while the last three affect the demonic powers specifically. We can tell that these plagues are final, because while the trumpet plagues affected only a third of the earth, the bowl plagues destroy the earth completely.

16:2	The 1st bowl – Sores break out on those who follow the beast. (See the 6th Egyptian plague – Ex 9:10f).
16:3	The 2nd bowl – Sea turns to blood and everything in it dies. (See the 1st Egyptian plague – Ex 7:17f).
16:4-7	The 3rd bowl – Rivers and springs turn to blood.
16:8-9	The 4th bowl – The Sun scorches people with flames yet they do not repent.

Q. Do you think God's final judgment on the ungodly is too harsh?

16:10-11 The 5th bowl – The throne and kingdom of the beast are cast into darkness. (See the 9th Egyptian plague – Ex 10:21f).

16:12-16 The 6th bowl – The Euphrates dries up allowing kings from the East to gather for war. The battleground is set at Armageddon (Har Magedon – the mount of Megiddo). We will hear more about this battle later.

16:17-21 The 7th bowl – Babylon is fallen!
With the fall of Babylon (which is the seat of the beast's kingdom), the 7th bowl brings about the final elimination of every oppressing worldly power in opposition to God.

17:1-18 The Harlot and the Beast

Babylon is depicted as a completely degraded woman, drunk on the blood of the saints. Historically, Babylon was the evil city so instrumental in the exile of God's people from Jerusalem. Here it is used symbolically to depict Rome – the 7 hills (17:9) being the giveaway. She is in every way the negative counter-image of the city of God, the New Jerusalem.

The explanations of the vision in v7ff raise more questions than they answer. If 7 emperors of Rome are indicated, which 7 are they? Again, it may be more helpful to remember that the number 7 is used symbolically throughout Revelation.

Q. For John's readers Babylon was quite clearly the Roman Empire and the beast its Ceasars. In other ages, other political empires can be said to have played the role of Babylon. What, if anything, is there about "Empire" as a concept that makes it potentially so evil? What "empires" rule the world today?

18:1-24 The Fall of Babylon

The fall of Babylon is not described in historical detail, instead we are presented with the funeral laments of the city's trade partners – kings, merchants and mariners. Then a millstone is thrown into the ocean to indicate that the city will play no further role in God's reign (See Jer 51:63f).

19:1-10 Songs of Praise

Two hymns of praise remind us that God's judgment is just and invite the faithful to the wedding banquet of the Lamb – a major theme of the following chapters.