

Revelation 6-8 "The Judgment Begins--the Seals"

With this study we now enter the "challenging" portion of Revelation--in terms of interpretation. A couple of things contribute to the challenge. One, the symbolic language increases (John uses human vocabulary to describe the "indescribable infinite"). And two, what John is describing from Revelation 6-22 is *future*. He's describing what is yet to happen. Let's set the stage for our study by commenting on the setting...

The Setting:

1. The risen Lord has returned to heaven (ch 1).
2. The church is living in a hostile world (chs 2-3).
3. The Lord allowed John to see "what must take place after this (4:1)." John recorded this revelation in chapters 6-22.
4. The Lord in heaven has a plan for the world which will be fulfilled by the Lamb (chs 4-5). Only the Lamb is worthy to "open the scroll and its seals (5:5)." He is worthy because of His work as Creator (4:11) and Redeemer (5:12).

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The Judgment Begins--the Seals:

In chapter 5 we saw the amazing account of the Almighty sitting on the heavenly throne with a scroll in His hands (1). John wept because no one was worthy to take this scroll, that is, until he saw the Lamb (6). The Lamb took the scroll from the One on the throne (7). In response, the angelic beings of heaven fell down in His worship (8).

Now in chapters 6-8 (the first part), the Lamb opens the seals, thus, enacting the contents of the scroll and fulfilling the Divine plan for the world. Notice:

--He opened the seals one at a time.

--There is a parenthesis between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals.

I. John saw the Lamb open the first six seals (6:1-17).

Who opened the seals? The Lamb did. And as He did John both heard and saw certain things. They represent the fulfillment of the plan of God for this world.

A. The First Seal (6:1-2)

1. John heard one of the four living creatures say, "Come!"

Q: Where did we see the living creatures before? 4:6-8

Q: To whom was the command "Come!" given?

2. John saw a white horse.

- a. The rider held a bow.
- b. The rider was given a crown.
- c. The rider was a conqueror.

Q: What's the significance of this? The imagery of four horsemen is found in Zech 1:8-17 and 6:1-8. What does a white horse represent?

B. The Second Seal (6:3-4)

1. John heard the second living creature say, "Come!"

2. John saw a fiery red horse.

- a. The rider was given power to take peace from the earth.
- b. The rider could make men slay each other.
- c. The rider was given a large sword.

Q: What does this imagery indicate will happen next?

C. The Third Seal (6:5-6)

1. John heard the third living creature say, "Come!"

2. John saw a black horse.

a. The rider held a pair of scales.

Q: What are scales used for?

b. A voice said, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages..."

Q: What does this indicate will happen? Famine

D. The Fourth Seal (6:7-8)

Notice the repeated phrase, "When the Lamb opened." The seal judgments are the activity of the Lamb.

1. John heard the fourth living creature say, "Come!"

2. John saw a pale horse.

a. The rider's name was Death.

- b. Hades was following close behind him.
- c. They were given power to kill a fourth of the earth.

Q: By what means will the destruction occur? See verse 8

Summary of first four seals: The first four seals go together, each using the symbolism of a horse. The fifth seal utilizes a different image.

E. The Fifth Seal (6:9-11)

- 1. John saw the souls of those who had been slain.

Q: Where were they? Verse 9--under what altar?

Q: Why had these individuals been slain?

- 2. John heard them ask, "How long?"

Q: What did they want to know?

- 3. John observed the response.

- a. Each was given a white robe.

- b. They were told to wait a little longer.

Q: Until what happened? Verse 11 "Until the number...is completed." Has God determined that a set number of His people will give their lives? (see Col 1:24)

F. The Sixth Seal (6:12-17)

- 1. John observed a series of catastrophic events (12-14).

- a. There was a great earthquake.

- b. The sun turned black.

- c. The moon turned blood red.

- d. The stars fell to earth.

- e. The sky receded like a scroll.

- f. Every mountain and island was removed.

Note: Joel 2:31 said this would happen before the "coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD."

Note: In Mark 13:24-26 Jesus said these events would occur prior to the His return.

- 2. John saw the reaction of people (15-17).

Q: What people? Verse 15 From royalty to slaves

a. They called to the mountains and rocks.

- "Hide us from the One on the throne."
- "Hide us from the wrath of the Lamb."

Discuss: Why would someone call on an inanimate object like a mountain? Maybe the point is to show who they did *not* call upon...

b. They did *not* call to the Lord.

Discuss: What *should* people do when God judges them? Repent! Plead for mercy. These people refuse to do so. They refused to repent. Why?

II. John saw a parenthesis of events before the final seal (7:1-17).

Notice the transition indicators in the flow of the narrative (7:1 "After this I saw," 7:9 "After this I looked," 7:13 "Then one of the elders"). John breaks the flow of the seal judgments to inform us of some other things he saw. He will do the same thing in the trumpet sequence later (10:1-11:13).

A. He saw angels (1-8).

Q: What were they doing?

1. Four angels held back four winds (1).

2. Another angel brought the seal of God (2).

a. He told the four angels not to harm the earth until the servants of God were sealed (3).

Q: Why were they to wait? The sealing seems to be to protect God's people from the coming judgments.

b. John heard the number of the sealed servants: 144,000 (4-8).

Key: Think about what this meant to the apostle John. He was a Jew. There hadn't been twelve tribes of Jews for over eight centuries (since 722 B.C.). He's living around A.D. 95. The Jewish temple where he'd once worshiped was destroyed 25 years earlier. The church is now 60 years old, and it's predominantly a Gentile church (with a Jewish remnant).

He must have wondered, "What about the promise Jesus made to the disciples just before returning to heaven as recorded in Acts 1:6--'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'" Now John hears about 144,000 that God has sealed "from all the tribes of Israel" (4). This must have encouraged John! But the plan of God is no longer limited to Israel. Notice who John sees next...

B. He saw a great multitude (9-10).

Q: What's true of this multitude?

1. There were too many to count.

2. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language.

Q: What does this indicate about God's plan? No hint of racism in that day!

3. They were standing before the throne in front of the Lamb.

Q: What's significant about where they are?

4. They were wearing white robes.

5. They were holding palm branches.

Q: Who else held palm branches? Remember Palm Sunday?

6. They were crying loudly, "Salvation belongs to our God...and to the Lamb."

Key: Notice the theme of their song--salvation!

C. He saw the reaction of the angels (11-12).

Q: What did they do?

D. He conversed with one of the elders (13-17).

The elder asked a question, and then answered his own question. Why?

1. The elder clarified the identity of the great multitude (13-14).

Q: Who are they?

2. The elder specified the privileges of the great multitude (15-17).

Q: Like what?

III. John saw the Lamb open the seventh seal (8:1-6).

A. There was silence for half an hour (1).

Q: What's true of this silence? It's the calm before the storm!

Q: What breaks the silence? Seven trumpet blasts. The seven trumpet judgments actually flow out of the seven seals, and are described in chapters 8-9.

B. John saw seven angels with seven trumpets (2).

C. John saw another angel with a golden censer (3-5).

1. He offered incense to God.

2. He hurled fire from the altar on the earth.

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Observations:

1. *The purpose of this vision (as of the entire book) is to reveal Jesus Christ.*

Discuss: What do we learn about Jesus from the vision of the seals?

2. *We need to approach this vision from the perspective of the original recipients.*

Discuss: What was true of them? The recipients were a late first century church facing severe persecution.

Discuss: What would the knowledge of the coming seal judgments do for the early church? It would encourage them and bolster their faith. It would remind them that God will have the final word. It would motivate them to do evangelism and rescue those currently not right with God.

3. *This vision reminds us that the God of love is also a God of wrath.*

Think of it. The once slain Lamb is the One who will judge the world. The world will one day beg for deliverance from "the wrath of the Lamb (6:16)." The idea of a lamb showing wrath sounds strange to us.

Discuss: What's the significance of the book of Revelation using the image of the "lamb" to depict Christ as the coming Judge?