

The Book of Revelation

The Sevens: the beginning of the end (chpts 6-10)

Introductory notes

The next five chapters have some of the most vivid and challenging imagery in the book. Many people compare the images to horror films or the stuff of nightmares. For us who read it, it can be very tempting to become frightened or confused by God's immense brutality. For this reason I am prefacing these chapters. What is God's main goal? Salvation. He wants all people to be saved, to repent, and to turn to him. Recall the events in Egypt in the Book of Exodus. The plagues that God wrought Egypt with were signs of his power and for the sake of the Egyptians letting his people go. We must see the signs of the next five chapters in that same light: God wants all people to repent and be saved.

Due to the linear nature of a book, we often try to put the events of Revelation in a sequence or think of them sequentially: six seals, then six trumpets, then six bowls. A careful read of the book reveals that all of these events are happening at the same time. As the six seals are being opened, so are the six trumpets blaring, so are the six bowls being poured out. The exception is the seventh of each kind. The seventh of each happens later in the book after an interlude. We must try to imagine that all of these events are taking place simultaneously. In a similar way, each sequence of events pauses at the fourth. Once the fourth seal is broken a new saga happens for the fifth, sixth, and seventh. This progression of thought and story adds a dramatic nature to the reading. Each progressive part of the sequences builds and becomes increasingly destructive leading to the cataclysmic sixth and seventh.

The Six Seals

The imagery follows from chapter five where the lamb takes the scroll from the right hand of God and looks as though he is going to open it. Well now he does. Each seal is broken consecutively with the consequence of it being opened, the proclamation of God's will, being expressed in sequence.

The first four seals are different than the last three. The first four follow in a specific fashion: first the seal is broken, then one of the living creatures calls out for an horse-rider, then the horse-rider is given a commission. These horse-riders are taken from the Book of Daniel where they represent the four most powerful nations who are oppressing the people of Israel. In Daniel the horse-riders are carrying the winds in their carts symbolizing the destructive nature of these leaders. The same imagery applies here but in a metaphorical sense. These riders are kings who are allowed access and full authority over their domain. The kings, represented by their golden crowns, symbolically represent the ways that human beings are destructive and the consequences for our actions.

White rider – military victory. The bow was the most feared weapon of the Parthians who caused great fear to the Romans. The military victory shows conquest and territorial expansion more than war.

Red Rider – bloodshed. This rider wages immense war to the point that peace is no longer possible.

Black Rider – Famine. The scale symbolizes the imbalance of the world caused by the war and destruction of the first two riders. Now the poor are no longer able to purchase food and basic supplies. Trees are rather important throughout the Book of Revelation. Trees provide the needed supplies that sustain life and therefore are not allowed to be destroyed.

Green Rider – pestilence. This rider is accompanied by Hades and thus can cause massive amounts of deaths throughout the world. Who is Hades? Hades is the Greek god of the underworld and death. The image of Hades and Death show that Hades is taking the souls of the dead people and bringing them to the underworld. Its not just death, but utter destruction and eternal death.

The fifth seal

This seal is the oddest of the seals and the other kinds of sevens. The opening of the fifth seal seems to be devoid of any kind of punishment or destruction. Instead God opens the chasm to the dead and allows them to rise. The dead cry out for vengeance. This seems odd to many readers. Why would the dead request vengeance? Normally we think of vengeance as pay back;, someone getting their just desserts. Notice that the holy ones are not exacting vengeance but crying out for it. They know that God is the only one who can truly avenge the crimes of the world and set things aright. They are crying out that justice be served and the world be set aright again. Two characteristics mark these holy ones: they are slaughtered and they have white robes. The fact of them being “slaughtered” links them to the lamb “who was slain.” Thus the giving of their lives makes them the same as the lamb. The white robes are different from the white clothing we have seen thus far. These white robes are more like the stoles of the priests than simple clothing. Thus these holy ones are made to be priests and offer prayers to God. The fact of the clothing being white indicates their connection to the lamb who can wash clothing and make it white by his blood, a paradoxical idea.

The sixth seal

Catastrophic events were not unknown to the 1st century Christians. Many cities had recently suffered devastating earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. So the image of the blackened sky and earthquakes would have been on the forefront of their minds. Yet these powerful events cause the people to cower before the might of God but not repent yet. Some of the imagery is strange. What does John mean by “stars falling from the sky?” Could it be a meteorite? The opening of the sixth seal marks that the day of the Lord is at hand as prophesized by the prophet Joel. The Day of the Lord is a specific phrase in Jewish prophesy that indicates that final moment when God will reveal himself completely to all of the universe. Many of apocalyptic prophets used this phrase extensively as a warning about complacency in the present moment.

The sealed ones (chapter 7)

The seal was an important sign for 1st century people, much like branding is for us. The seal was placed on property like cattle to designate them to a person. Military people were also branded or

sealed with the mark of their military captain or leader. Thus the idea of *sealing* a person would have been common practice. This image, however, now brings in battle or military imagery which will continue to develop as we move through this book. The angel comes with the “seal of the living God.” The destructive angels who have control over the whole earth and can destroy it with the four winds are told to halt until God has protected his holy ones. Again the theme of God’s desire for mercy and repentance returns in this passage. His holy ones shall not be destroyed but kept safe since they have witnessed to him. The total number sealed is 144,000. Twelve is the number of the complete tribes of Israel, multiplied by itself to show that it is all of Israel, and then multiplied by the greatest number in Greek – 1000 – shows the great immensity of God’s promise being fulfilled. The number 1000 is specific to the largest size of one legion of the Roman army. The use of the number 1000 takes on a military tones as though God is building an army to wage war on the world, something akin to the opposite of the desert account in Exodus. Williamson comments that 1st century Christians would not have known a distinction between Jews and Christians since almost everyone was Jewish-Christian. Therefore the number 144,000 represent all the Jewish-Christians and the people of the promise. I argue that the distinction had already been made by the 50’s and therefore John is showing us the fulfillment of God’s promise to his people Israel but saving the remanent faithful. One tribe is missing from the list: Dan. The Tribe of Dan was always known for its idolatrous behavior and the Book of Revelation strongly criticizes idolatrous behavior, which could explain why its removal from the list.

The salvation of the elect

Part of the reason why I claim the 144,000 are only Jews is because of this passage. Here we have the multitude who are saved because of the action of the lamb in whose blood they have been washed. Why would there be a distinction between these two groups unless there was a difference? The Jews were saved by the promise. Christians are saved by the action of Jesus’ sacrifice. Therefore this immense multitude who is beyond counting are the ones washed in Jesus’ blood and wearing white robes. These ones, however, are holding palm branches. Palm branches signify victory. During the Jewish feast of Tabernacles, the Jewish people would carry palm branches reminding them of their time in the desert and their freedom from slavery.

A dialogue ensues. The people are worshipping again, or never stopped. Notice how worship is the most common action in heaven. Then John asks about these people dressed in white. The elder tells him that they have survived the time of trial, namely they endured the struggles of the world and remained faithful.

The seven trumpets (chapter 8)

The seventh seal is opened with quite a change in events. Until this point in the book everyone has been worshipping with the halls of heaven full of sound and destructive events happening on earth below. Now a period of silence comes with the seventh seal. The silence is the awe as God reveals himself. This sense of silence pervades Scripture and our liturgies reminding us that our reaction to the great theophany, God’s revelation, is silent awe.

Following the silence begins a new cycle of worship with an angel bringing the prayers of the holy ones symbolized by a huge bowl of incense. This passage reminds us that our prayers are greatly pleasing to God. God wants to hear our voice, he wants to hear our prayers, as something that makes him happy.

The first four trumpets

The seals were the consequences of our human actions that cause destruction to the world. The trumpets are God's destructive action against nature and the natural world we hold as ours. These destructive events remind us of Egypt and the ways the God showed his power to the Egyptians. Now he is showing his power to the world to make people repent.

Trumpet	sign from God	Sign in Egypt
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1st trumpet – hail and fire mixed with blood – death of the 1st born

2nd trumpet – burning mountain thrown into the sea – hail

3rd trumpet – poisoned water – rivers of blood

4th trumpet – blotting out of the sun, moon, and stars – darkness

The eagle in flight represents the bird of prey but also the terrifying image of a majestic bird. It cried thrice “woe” preparing and warning the people of the upcoming calamities which are worse than those we have seen thus far.

The fifth trumpet

Several times stars have fallen or things have fallen from heaven. This time only a single star fell. Although the exact reference is unclear, most likely this was the event of the fallen angels who rebelled against God. Since the angel opened the great abyss where the dead are and the great monsters, the fallen angel is Satan or the Devil. Smoke has two meanings. Smoke normally refers to the scene after a destructive event like Sodom and Gomorrah. Smoke also indicates God's action: the column of smoke that led the people through the desert. Here the image is of destruction. This angel is causing destruction across the entire earth.

The Locusts

Generally locusts or grasshoppers are not terrifying to us. But what about when they have the voices of lions, poisoned scorpion tails, bodies of horses, heads of humans, and gold crowns? These locusts are the terrifying image of the Roman or Parthian horseman who could devastate towns during times of war. The fierceness of the horses were a scene of horror for 1st century peoples. Hence the locusts resemble an army of horseman. The locusts are likened to kings due to their golden crowns. They only terrorized the people without the seal of God showing, once again, that God protects those who believe in him. The last words “Abaddon” and “Apollyon” translate to Destruction. Thus the locusts and the beasts from the abyss cause great destruction.

The Sixth Trumpet

The destruction escalates. From the very altar itself (horns also means corners) comes the voice that allows the release of the sixth seal and the four destructive winds. Now they destroy a third of the earth whereas the horsemen were given only a quarter. Each consecutive destructive event will continue to destroy more until the world is finally brought into subjection. The image for the sixth seal is a great army. The greatest threat to the Roman empire came from the nations beyond the Euphrates to the east. These same people caused most of the calamities for the Jews as well. Therefore the eastern people are mounting an immense assault: 1000 multiplied by a 1000, the greatest possible number in Greek. The colors are symbolic: red for blood, blue for smoke, and yellow for sulphur; the three things found in the abyss or Hell. The reason for such destruction is idolatry. God abhors idolatry. John makes a point about the kinds of idolatry quoting from Psalm 135. Also from their practices of sorcery and magic which is another form of idolatry.

The Small Scroll (chapter 10)

Although the word changes only a little, it is unclear whether the small scroll is the same scroll from chapter 5. In context they seem to be the same scroll. The mighty angel who brought John to these visions now hold the open scroll (See Ezekiel 3) and is about to read it. Notice the imagery of the angel compared to everything else thus far. The angel is wrapped in cloud like God, halo around his head, face shone like the sun, right foot on the sea and left foot on land, and with a voice like a lion or resembling God's voice. Even with the scroll opened and everyone at the edge of their seats wondering about the contents of this scroll, John is not allowed to speak about its contents yet. The scroll is sealed again and waits for its fulfillment. Instead the scene switches to the mysterious seventh trumpet which signals the end is coming very soon, "without delay." Much like Ezekiel, John is told to take the scroll and eat the scroll symbolic of prophesy. The next few chapters will be the prophesy of John and the information contained in that scroll. Unlike Ezekiel the scroll will turn John's stomach sour and its contents are for everyone to hear.