

The Book of Revelation

Week #7 – Opening of the Seven Seals

I. REVIEW OF WEEK #6

Weeks 5 and 6 [Revelation chapters 4 and 5] introduced us to the worship of God and the Lamb by:

- The four-living creatures [angels/Cherubim];
- The twenty-four elders [priests/saints in heaven], and
- All of creation.
- We were also introduced to the Lamb who was the only one who had the authority to take the scroll from the right hand of the One sitting on his throne.

II. OVERVIEW OF WEEK #7

After describing his vision of heaven, especially the risen Christ empowered to reveal God’s hidden plans [chapters 4-5], John now begins to disclose that revelation little by little as each of the seven seals is broken [chaps 6-7].

We now begin the section of Revelation dealing with the coming judgments on Jerusalem pictured consecutively as seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls.

This will unfold throughout most of the rest of the book.

It is important to note that these three sets of seven are not twenty-one events that occur in chronological order but seven events told three times in different ways.

A. The Seven Seals

As one by one the seals are broken, history unfolds before John’s eyes. The breaking of the seals brings judgment on the earth, which is stained with the righteous blood of the martyrs.

B. Parallels with the Gospels

The similarities of the events in the seven seals with the mini-apocalypses in the synoptic Gospels are striking, and parallel the end-time woes that Jesus warned would lead up to the destruction of Jerusalem.

Revelation 6 follows the pattern found in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 [mini-apocalypses] in which Jesus discusses the coming judgment on the Jerusalem temple, and at the end of the world in terms of:

1. Wars [Rev 6:2; Lk 21:9];
2. International conflict [Rev 6:4; Lk 21:10];
3. Famine [Rev 6:5-6; Lk 21:11];
4. Pestilence [Rev 6:8; Lk 21:11];
5. Persecutions [Rev 6:9; Lk 21:12];
6. Earthquakes [Rev 6:12; Lk 21:11]; and
7. Cosmic disturbances [Rev 6:12-14; Lk 21:25-26].

[See table of comparison of events in Revelation 6 and Matthew 24 in “*Coming Soon*” pages 94 – 95].

C. Fulfillment of Prophecy

All these things did come to pass in the first century and culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70. They also prefigure events that will occur near the End of Time.

Eusebius, the Church’s first historian, uses Jewish historian Josephus’ account of the destruction of Jerusalem as evidence of the fulfillment of these events.

But we must always remember that there are multiple layers of meaning and fulfillment in Scripture, especially with apocalyptic prophecy.

These Gospel passages don’t just point to the destruction of Jerusalem; they also foreshadow God’s judgment at the end of time.

III. THE FOUR HORSEMEN

The breaking of the seals brings judgment upon the earth. The first four judgments are described in the vision of the four horsemen.

Each horse and rider symbolize the particular judgment they are authorized to execute.

It is always one of the four living creatures [Cherubim] that summon the horsemen in a voice of thunder, “Come,” as the historical process begins to unfold.

The four horsemen, also mentioned in Zechariah 6:1-8, are probably four angels.

The horsemen bring about God’s covenant judgment on Jerusalem, which culminated in the destruction of the temple in AD 70, just as Jesus had predicted.

Read: Revelation 6:1-8

[1] Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say, as with a voice of thunder, "Come!"

[2] And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

[3] When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!"

[4] And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword.

[5] When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I saw, and behold, a black horse, and its rider had a balance in his hand;

[6] and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; but do not harm oil and wine!"

[7] When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!"

[8] And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him; and they were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

A. First Seal - The White Horse of Conquest

The white horse and rider stand for conquest in war. Roman generals who were victorious in war usually rode a white horse

in their victory parade. It is a vision of the tragedy of military conquest about to be unleashed against the Jews and Jerusalem.

And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet [Mt 24:6].

B. Second Seal - The Red Horse of Bloodshed

The function of the second horse and its rider is to take peace from the earth. They stand for persecution, civil unrest and international strife and warfare; the destructive strife that sets man against man and nation against nation in a chaos of tragic destruction.

For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom . . . [Mt 24:7a].

C. Third Seal – The Black Horse of Famine

The symbol of a “balance” or “scales” is used as a symbol for famine, since it is then that food needs to be carefully weighed and measured out, or rationed.

A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius represents super inflation. A full day’s wage buys only a day’s ration of wheat for one person, and a ration of barley for a small family.

In ordinary times, one day’s pay, the Roman denarius, would buy about ten times more than indicated here.

And there will be famines and earthquakes in various places [Mt 24:7b.]

D. Fourth Seal – The Pale (Green) Horse of Pestilence

The rider’s name “Death and Hades” seems to suggest that he is the worst of the four horsemen. The colour of the horse is death-like; greenish, ashen, livid.

Death is personified by the horse’s sinister rider. This symbol is reinforced by his companion *Hades*, or *Sheol*, the dark abode of the dead.

The rider seems to be a combination of all the others – sword, famine, pestilence [fatal contagious disease], beasts.

The same four curses ravaged Jerusalem in the sixth century BC, at the time of the Babylonian Exile [Ez 14:21], as punishment for its infidelity the Lord.

In Revelation, the power of the fourth horse and rider is limited to a fourth of the earth – three quarters of the earth is spared.

IV. FIFTH SEAL – THE SOULS UNDER THE ALTAR

At the breaking of the fifth seal comes the vision of the souls of those who had died for their faith. Jesus left his followers in no doubt as to the suffering and the martyrdom they would be called upon to endure.

"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake [Mt. 24:9].

Read: Revelation 6:9-11

[9] When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne;

[10] they cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?"

[11] Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

A. Altar

This altar is the heavenly counterpart to the bronze altar of sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple [2 Chron 4:1].

The souls of the martyrs [*those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne*]; are under the altar.

This image is taken directly from the sacrificial ritual of the Jerusalem Temple. When animals were sacrificed in the temple, the blood from the offering would actually run down to the base of the altar.

Although the martyrs were slain on earth, God received their death as a sacrifice on his heavenly altar, from which their blood ran down.

The blood was regarded as being the life and the life belonged to God.

This means that the life-blood of the martyrs has been poured out as a sacrificial offering to God.

B. The Martyred Souls Cry Out for Justice

The image of the souls crying out for the judgment of their murderers calls to mind the story of Abel, whose blood cried out to God for vengeance on his brother Cain [Gen 4:10].

The Christian is forbidden to seek revenge [Rom 12:19], but he should certainly pray that injustices be righted, whether by the conversion of the sinner or vindication of the oppressed.

He is to pray, not out of hatred for his enemies, but for love of justice.

V. SIXTH SEAL: THE WRATH OF THE LAMB

Read: Revelation 6:12-17

12: When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood,

13: and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale;

14: the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

15: Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains,

16: calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb;

17: for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?"

A. Eschatological Woes

The apocalyptic events of the sixth seal use symbolic imagery to predict future events. We should be careful not to identify every detail as a literal prophecy.

The apocalyptic events mentioned are:

1. A great earthquake;

2. The sun is darkened and the moon becomes blood-red;
3. The stars fall from the sky;
4. The sky vanishes like a rolled-up scroll;
5. Every mountain and island is moved.

B. Cosmic Upheavals

The ancients measured time by the movements of the sun, moon, and the stars.

Cosmic imagery was often used in the Old Testament to describe a political event on earth that was “earth-shaking,” such as the destruction of a nation or city.

For example, falling stars, darkened sun and moon are used in Isaiah 13:10 to describe the fall of Babylon, which is the supreme symbol of human wickedness in the Old Testament.

*For the stars of the heavens and their constellations
will not give their light;
the sun will be dark at its rising
and the moon will not shed its light.*

In Revelation, Jerusalem is the new Babylon subject to the same prophecies of destruction.

The image of the destruction of sun, moon, and stars is a way of telling Jerusalem, “Your time is up; judgment is at hand!”

Though a literal fulfillment cannot be ruled out for the future, the woes unleashed by the seven seals parallel the eschatological woes that Jesus warned would occur within one generation.

These disasters occurred just before and during the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 [see Lk 21:5-28].

C. The Fig Tree

The image of the barren fig tree was used by Jesus as a symbol of the “fruitlessness” of Jerusalem, ripe for judgment.

D. The Message

The message is this: Jerusalem is about to experience the same judgment God leveled against the enemies of his people in the past, because Jerusalem has become like them.

E. Mountains and Islands

Mountains and islands were places of refuge during troubled times. In saying that these places will be removed, John is telling his audience that there will be no place left to hide.

Therefore those who, “*hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains,*” will not escape judgment.

F. All Will Be Judged – the Great and Small Alike

No one will escape God’s judgment. People of every rank will experience it. Verse 15 mentions seven social groups: kings, great men, generals, rich, strong, slave, free – “the whole fabric of human society.”

*15: Then **the kings** of the earth and the **great men** and **the generals** and the **rich** and the **strong**, and every one, **slave** and **free**, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains . . .*

When the Day of the Lord comes, people of every rank will seek to hide in the mountains and risk being crushed by the rocks rather than face *the wrath of God and the Lamb* [Rev 6:16].

G. Sin Makes us Hide from God

Adam and eve sought to hide themselves from God after they had sinned [Gen 3:8].

The terrible thing about sin is that it makes one a fugitive from God.

The supreme thing about the work of Jesus Christ is that it puts us in a relationship with God in which we no longer need to hide, knowing that we can cast ourselves on the love and mercy of God.

H. The Wrath of the Lamb

Though the wrath of God is frequently mentioned in Revelation, the Lamb is always depicted as peaceful and gentle. How to explain this paradox?

First, the phrase the “wrath of God and the Lamb” is expressed and experienced by the **enemies** of God [Rev 6:16], not his friends.

The wrath of God is the wrath of love, which is not out to destroy but even in anger is out to save the one it loves.

As Fr. George Montague says [*The Apocalypse* – pg 105]:

“The wrath of God is not God ‘losing his temper’ in an arbitrary decision to punish. In reality it is nothing else than the effect which human beings experience when they choose to turn from God [Rom 1:18-32].

One cannot turn from the light without experiencing darkness; or from love without experiencing bitterness, or from life without experiencing death [Is 24:4-6].”

I. The End is not Yet!

The inhabitants of the earth think that the day of God’s punishment has come [Rev 6:17]. This is not John’s view, however, for the role of the martyrs has not yet been fully played out. Worse woes still await the unbelieving world.

Review

1. *The Apocalypse* – notes by Archbishop Collins (handout)
2. The Four Senses of Scripture (handout)

Read

1. *Revelation to St. John* – Ignatius Catholic Study Bible
Chapter 7 – The 144,000 of Israel Sealed.
2. *Coming Soon: Chapter 7 – Ransom Captive Israel.*

Discuss

1. Multiple Choice Questions 1-5, and
2. Discussion/Study Questions 1- 4 at end of Chapter 7 of *Coming Soon.*