

“The Seven Seals”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 12

Texts: Revelation 6:1-8; Zechariah 6:1-8

Human curiosity can be a good thing. But it can also be a bad thing. One place where human curiosity often extends beyond legitimate bounds is when it comes to the book of Revelation. People are naturally curious about what the future holds. It is only natural that we seek explanations for those things which plague human existence; evil and human suffering, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, floods and famines. But add sensational or catastrophic events to our natural curiosity to understand the ebb and flow of human history, events like those associated with the end of the millennium or the terrorist attack of 9-11, our curiosity jumps off the chart.

Many preachers and Bible teachers tell us that in the Book of Revelation we will find specific explanations for virtually every current event mentioned on the evening news. We are told that the way we should interpret biblical prophecy is by correlating current events with the things God reveals to us here in the Book of Revelation. Yes, Revelation addresses the future. But it does so not by predicting every event which transpires in the middle east or which effects the global economy. Revelation gives us the big picture of future events by reminding us that God is sovereign over all the affairs of men, and that whatever comes to pass, does so because God has decreed it. Throughout this book, Christ’s church is reminded that God is bringing all of human history to a great and glorious goal, the second coming of Jesus Christ to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new.

As we move along in our series on Revelation, we are in the midst of John’s second vision. We now come to a new aspect of this vision in Revelation 6:1-8:5, where John discusses the opening of the scroll and its seven seals which had been sealed until the time of the end. The scroll reveals God’s purposes during the last days—that period of time between Christ’s first advent and his second coming. The unsealing of this scroll begins a pattern in which God will reveal dramatic information about the future course of redemptive history.

But the Book of Revelation is not written to predict specific future events. The apostle John is not to be confused with Nostradamus. In apocalyptic literature such as this, John does not intend for us to understand the things he reveals literally. Rather, the apostle paints vivid word pictures depicting the course of redemptive history and the on-going struggle between Christ and his already defeated foe, the Devil, who, like a wounded animal, is all the more vicious before his final destruction (cf. Revelation 12:12).

This means that the Book of Revelation is essentially a divinely revealed commentary upon the Old Testament. The key to understanding this book correctly is not to look for particular verses which explain current events. Rather, we must understand John’s symbolic language in the light of the Old Testament. John’s visions are intended to explain how Jesus Christ fulfills Old Testament prophecy and how God will bring all things into submission under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This fact was especially important to those Christians to whom John was writing in the first century. They faced the sword of the Satanically empowered beast, which is the state. They were forced to acknowledge Caesar as Lord or else risk life and livelihood. They faced the full flower of Greek and Roman paganism. They faced false apostles and prophets who sought to undermine the purity of the gospel by introducing destructive heresies. Since they were forced to confront all of these issues, God’s gives his struggling

people a heavenly perspective through the visions given to John and recorded in this book. They must know that their struggles are not in vain and that when all is said and done they will be vindicated.

And yet, as we have also seen, when John speaks to the churches of Western Asia Minor near the end of the first century, he is also speaking to us living in the opening decade of the 21st. This becomes apparent when John's focus in this second vision shifts from the scene of the throne in heaven to the scroll and its divine perspective on those covenant blessings and curses which will unfold throughout the millennial age, which is that period of time between the two comings of Christ, elsewhere spoken of as the "last days." When the Lamb opens the scroll, God will reveal a great deal about the final epoch of human history in those days before God brings redemptive history to its glorious climax.

But before we turn to our text, a couple things need to be said about how we are to understand what follows. From here on out, we will find a series of judgments which occur in a cyclical fashion. There are the seven seal judgments in Revelation 6:1-8:5, the seven trumpet judgments in Revelation 8:6-11:19 and then the seven bowl judgments of Revelation 16. We should not read these sections of Revelation as though they were historical narrative in which the seal judgments occur in time chronologically prior to the trumpet judgments, with the bowl judgments finally coming at the end. Rather, in apocalyptic literature each of these cycles of judgment overlap. Therefore, what is depicted in the seal judgments covers the entire period of time between Christ's first and second advents. The same is true for the trumpet and bowl judgments—although the bowl judgments intensify at the time of the end.

And yet, as we move from the seals to the trumpets to the bowls, we will indeed see an intensification of God's judgment upon the Dragon (Satan), the beast, the false prophet, and all those who serve them, as well as an increasingly violent response from the Dragon and his henchmen as they wage war upon the Saints before their appointed end finally comes. Therefore, each of these series of judgments covers the entire church age. But as the three cycles of judgment are revealed, they intensify as we move from the seals to the trumpets to the bowls. Furthermore, each of the individual cycles of judgment intensifies before the end of the age in the days immediately before our Lord's return. Therefore, we have every reason to believe that while these cycles of judgment characterize the present age, they will intensify greatly immediately before the end.

This retelling of the course of history from different perspectives is a key feature of apocalyptic literature. Technically known as recapitulation, it is helpful to recall the analogy used by Dennis Johnson of Westminster Seminary California, who likens each of these reoccurring visions and cycles to differing camera angles upon the same event. In the first vision, John looks at the present age from the perspective of Christ's continuing presence with his people. Then, in Revelation 4-5, John then describes the scene before the heavenly throne. And then beginning in Revelation 6, John will describe the course of the present age through the lens of a series of on-going judgments which culminate in the return of Jesus Christ.

In order to understand this pattern better, it is helpful to turn to the gospels. Jesus addresses this same subject in the Olivet Discourse, when our Lord speaks of the signs of the end of the age in response to the disciple's questions about the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. As we read in Matthew 24 (beginning at verse 3), "*Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. 'Tell us,' they said, 'when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'*" Jesus answered: '*Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and*

kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains." This sounds remarkably similar to some of the things in our text.

Jesus describes the cycle of wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, and so on, found throughout the church age before his return as being like "birth pains." While intense pain characterizes the entire process of labor and delivery, early on the contractions are followed by brief periods of relief. But as labor proceeds to birth, the pain becomes more and more intense and the periods of relief virtually disappear. Just before the birth itself, the pain becomes so intense and the contractions so violent, that it becomes impossible to tell which contraction will be the final one.

This same intensifying cycle of signs of the end preceding the Lord's return and which Jesus describes as birth pains, should be kept in mind when we look at the cycles of judgment in the Book of Revelation. The cycles of judgment begin when the scroll is opened. They continue throughout the course of the present age. They reach their climax with the return of Jesus Christ to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new at the end of the age.¹

Another point we should consider before we turn to the text is the way in which the seal and trumpet judgments are arranged, for they clearly parallel each other. Each of these series of judgments begins with an opening scene explaining the judgments to come. In Revelation 5:1-14, the opening scene has to do with the worthiness of the Lamb to open the scroll, while in Revelation 8:2-5 the scene preceding the trumpet judgments has to do with the seven angels who respond to the prayers of the saints. There are seven seals and seven trumpets, indicating that when these judgments are complete, God's wrath will have come to its end, having been poured out against the earth and its inhabitants in all of its fury. When both the seal and trumpet judgments begin, six separate cycles of judgment unfold, followed by a dramatic interlude in which God's care for his people is reaffirmed, before the seventh and final judgment begins. In both cases the cycle of seven judgments bring us to Christ's return and to the end of the age—the perfection and fullness symbolized by the number seven.

Therefore, while not predicting a specific war, or a specific famine, or a specific earthquake, or specific events in Israel, in these cycles of judgment Revelation depicts all future wars, all future famine and plague, and all the upheavals of the earth as judgments of God pointing to a final judgment yet to come. As Christians, who view these matters through the eyes of faith, we should not be alarmed when such events occur, in fact, we should expect them. These things remind us that creation has been corrupted by sin and that the world groans under our feet until the day of redemption. But one day, Christ will return to remove the curse and renew the heavens and the earth. For there is no solution to human suffering and the tumult of the nations except for God's direct and final intervention in the person of his son, the very thing to which all of these signs and cycles of judgment point us.

And so with this background material behind us, we now in a position to turn to our text this morning, Revelation 6:1-8.

The vision in Revelation 6-8 is a direct continuation of the vision which began in Revelation 4-5. As the vision of the heavenly throne unfolds in Revelation 4, John shifts his focus from the glory of the one seated on the throne and the creatures who attend him to the scene in Revelation five, the Lamb who was slain and who alone is worthy to open the mysterious scroll which had been sealed until the time of the

¹ Poythress, The Returning King, 113.

end. The Lamb is worthy because he has purchased men and women from every tribe, tongue, nation and race to be a kingdom of priests in direct fulfillment of the messianic expectations of Israel's prophets. Because Jesus Christ—who is the lion of Judah and the Root of David—has died for his people and removed the guilt of their sins, and, in addition, kept God's law perfectly, the Lamb has fulfilled all of the righteous requirements of the law, making him alone worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals. Although John wept when he thought that no one was worthy to open the scroll, he was reminded by one of the elders that is the Lamb is indeed quite worthy to take the scroll and open its seals. And so the Lamb approaches the one seated upon the throne and takes the scroll. When he does so, all of heaven worships him. It is truly a dramatic scene as the heavenly choir sings praises to Lamb who has redeemed his people through the shedding of his blood and to the one seated on the throne.

Since the material in Revelation 6 is a continuation of the vision begun in Revelation 4:1, we read in Revelation 6:1, that John “*watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.*” In order to understand the significance of this vision and the four horsemen mentioned in the first four of the seal judgments, we need to recall the words of Zechariah 6, when the prophet saw four colored horses and their chariots symbolizing the four winds of heaven. In Zechariah’s prophecy, the horses represent God’s judgment upon the enemies of Judah going out to the four corners of the earth.

As we have seen in previous weeks, in the Book of Revelation, the number four symbolizes the earth. Therefore, in John’s vision, the four horsemen go forth to the very ends of the earth for the purpose of bringing God’s judgment upon all those nations who oppose God’s rule and who oppress Christ’s church. All the earth is effected by the devastation brought about by the horsemen. The four horsemen not only bring about the vindication of God’s people through that series of judgments found here in the first four seal judgments, these judgments virtually mirror the signs of the end mentioned by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse. The final three seals, to which we turn next week, include the fifth seal which is the cry of the martyrs, the sixth seal which is the return of Christ, and the seventh seal which is absolute silence in heaven, indicating that when God’s judgments are complete, there is nothing left to say as all of heaven stands in awe of God and the Lamb.²

Because the Lamb is worthy to open the scroll, he is the one who empowers these riders to go forth and bring desolation upon the earth. Since the first rider goes forth to conquer and rides upon a white horse, a number of commentators connect this particular rider to the image in Revelation 19 of Jesus Christ riding upon a white horse coming in judgment. Thus the interpretation often given the white horse and its rider here by our postmillennial friends, is that of Christ going forth to conquer unbelief through the power of his word, that double-edged sword which brings judgment upon the nations. But there are good reasons to believe that this horse and its rider depicted in the first seal judgment is not directly connected to the later vision of Christ.

In Revelation 19, Jesus wields a sword and wears many crowns, while here in Revelation 6, the rider has a bow and a single crown. Therefore, most likely the rider is not Christ, but Christ’s agent, who leads the three riders who follow him in bringing the devastation of war, famine, hardship, and death upon the

² Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 117.

earth as the direct judgment of God.³ In the ancient world, white horses were often a symbol of conquest. So, when the rider of the white horse goes forth to conquer, he unleashes all of the horrible judgments which follow. And because he is the conqueror, nothing can stay his hand.

Once the first rider goes forth the others immediately follow. “*When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, ‘Come!’ Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.*” The rider of the white horse symbolizes conquest, while the rider of the red horse symbolizes the bloodshed and warfare which breaks out upon the entire earth until Christ returns at the end of the age to bring peace to all of creation. While a number of commentators speculate about the relationship of the first seal to the second, the main point is that together these two riders remove peace from the earth. And with peace removed from the earth, ever increasing bloodshed and warfare follow.

It has been said that in the twentieth century more lives were lost in war and through atrocities than in all of previous human history. Indeed, there were not only two world wars in which millions were killed, there were countless other conflicts of a lesser scale. Then there was the Holocaust in which some six million Jews were killed along with millions of Christians and other ethnic minorities. There was the genocide brought about by the Turks in 1915 upon the Armenians which killed millions. Pol Pot reportedly slaughtered a million Cambodians in the so-called killing fields of the mid-1970's.

Throughout the 30's, 40's and 50's, Josef Stalin killed millions of his own people in the endless purges of dissenters and military officers by the Soviet party machine. Clearly, the white horse and the red horse have gone forth and removed peace from the earth. Although there have been wars from the time of Christ until the present age, the cycles of judgment are clearly intensifying. There will not be genuine peace upon the earth until Christ comes again, and if the intensifying pattern holds, the coming century may well be worse than the last.

Next, John sees the Lamb open the third seal. In verse 5, we read, “*When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, ‘A quart of wheat for a day’s wages, and three quarts of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!’*” Some historical background is necessary to understand the meaning of this particular judgment. In John's day and age, a quart of wheat was an average day's supply for a soldier, and that amount of wheat usually cost the typical worker one-eighth of a denarius. But after the black horse goes forth, the price of grain is inflated 800%. Barley was much cheaper but was eaten by the poor since it did not have the food value of wheat. Three quarts of barley for a day's wage was an outlandish price. But notice that the supplies of oil and wine are not effected.⁴

Therefore, what is symbolized by the rider of the black horse is famine and the resulting economic turmoil. Although famine and the related hardships result from God's judgment, the famine brought about by the third rider on the black horse is not total. God is holy and will punish all human sin. But God is also gracious and longsuffering. This tells us is that God's judgments are restrained in some sense, and are limited in their scope until the time of the end. This is what is known as common grace. Indeed, things could be much worse if God was not restraining his wrath and his judgment upon the

³ Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 118-119

⁴ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 121.

earth. But one day he will no longer restrain his righteous anger and these cycles of wrath will reach their climax when Christ returns in judgment.

In verses 7-8, John sees the Lamb open the fourth seal. “*When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.’*” The rider of the pale horse (literally the “green horse,” the color used in Koine Greek for the pallor of sickness), is named death and Hades closely follows him when he goes forth.

Recall that in Revelation 1, Jesus held in his hands the keys of death and of Hades, symbolizing his power to liberate people from death and its consequences. Now the rider on the pale horse is given the power to kill, to bring war, to bring famine and plague upon the earth. He also possesses the power to cause the beasts of the earth to rebel against human dominion. When the fourth horseman goes forth, all of the earlier calamities increase in intensity.

What then, should we take with us from John’s account of the four horsemen going forth in judgment?

When the Lamb opens the scroll which had been sealed until the time of the end, we see, in part, the future of the course of redemptive history. The seals take us from the time of John into our present age, all the way to end of time and the coming of Jesus Christ. The seven seal judgments are the first of three cycles of judgment, which intensify in severity as we move from the seals, to the trumpets, to the bowls. These cycles of judgment each cover the inter-advental age from different perspectives—or camera angles. While these various judgments characterize the entire inter-advental period, the intensity of the judgment increases dramatically within each cycle as we near the time of the end. This fits perfectly with Jesus’ description of the signs of the end as entailing war, famine and earthquakes, events which he calls birth pains of the end.

To the original audience—persecuted Christians living in the first century—John’s vision of the seven seals would have brought great comfort. For all intents and purposes, the Roman empire seemed invincible. Its military and economic power, its cultural achievements and civic infrastructure was the marvel of the ancient world. And yet, when empowered by Satan, the Roman empire became the Beast, the arch-enemy of Christ’s church which demanded that Christians affirm that Caesar is Lord, not Christ, and which was willing to put Christians in prison, to forbid them from buying and selling, and even to put many of them to death because of their faith in the Savior. John’s vision of the seals reminds the persecuted church that not even Rome was able to withstand the seal judgments of the Lamb. As God brought Pharaoh and the mighty Egyptian empire to its knees through the mediation of Moses, so Jesus Christ—to whom the mediation of Moses pointed—will bring Rome to its knees. Indeed, war, famine and pestilence, along with the increasing immorality and paganism in response, was the empire’s undoing. The lesson to Christ’s church is that as God brings down empires, as God brings earthquakes, famines, pestilence and wars, so too, he will bring all human rebellion to an end. In the present, God’s judgments are restrained. But one day they will not be so restrained. There is coming a final judgment, when all the scales will be balanced, and all evil-doers punished. Christ’s people will be vindicated.

Having heard John’s words, Christians know how the redemptive-historical drama will turn out. Christ, not the Beast, wins in the end! Therefore, when we are persecuted by the state, when we are hated because we are followers of Christ, when the earth shakes beneath our feet, when war comes, when

economic hardship occurs, when terrorists crash airliners full of innocent victims into the World Trade Center, this is not a sign that God is indifferent to us and unable to help. This points us ahead to the fact that one day, God will bring all things into submission to Christ. In fact, these successive judgments are rehearsals of the final judgment yet to come.

Let us not forget that since God has poured out his wrath upon his own dear son, when Jesus suffered for our sins on Calvary's cross, we need never fear that final judgment yet to come, that terrible day to which the seven seal judgment point us. For wars and rumors of wars, earthquake, famine and pestilence are the signs that all is not right in the world and that one day Jesus Christ himself will return to raise the dead, judge the world and make all things new. Only then will there be peace on earth, and only then will creation no longer groan under our feet!

Come quickly, Lord Jesus! Amen!