

## “There Was Silence in Heaven”

### *Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 13*

*Texts: Revelation 6:9-8:1; Zephaniah 1:7-10*

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When the disciples asked Jesus about the signs of the end of the age, our Lord spoke of wars and rumors of war, of earthquakes, sickness, and famine—signs which our Lord described as birth pains of the end (cf. Matthew 24:8). In the Book of Revelation these same signs appear when the Lamb took the scroll and opened its seven seals. In our text last time, we read of four horsemen going forth in judgment, taking peace from the earth and bringing famine, pestilence and death upon the earth’s inhabitants. The judgments contained within these seals, are the first of a series of cycles of judgment, each of which are rehearsals for the final judgment yet to come at the end of the age, when Jesus Christ returns to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. The same one who spoke of the signs of the end is the only one worthy to open the scroll and execute the judgments prescribed within. God is directing all of history to its appointed end, the wrath of the Lamb.

We are now in Revelation chapters 6-7, working our way through John’s second vision in which the Lamb opens the mysterious scroll and its seven seals which had been sealed until the time of the end. When each of the first four seals is opened, a colored horse and its rider goes forth to execute God’s judgment upon the earth, to scatter his enemies and vindicate his people.

When the lamb opens the first and second seals, we read of a white horse and its rider representing conquest, and a red horse whose rider was given a sword. As these two riders go forth, peace is removed from the earth. This means that the entire period of time between our Lord’s first coming and his second advent will be characterized by wars and rumors of war which will only increase in intensity as we near the time of the end.

When the lamb opens the third seal, a black horse and its rider goes forth. He brings famine and economic hardship upon the earth. And then there is the fourth rider on a pale horse, who is named death and Hades follows closely behind him as he rides forth in judgment. John says that the consequence of these particular judgments is that one quarter of the earth’s population will die as a result.

Therefore, in the first four of the seven seal judgments we are reminded that because of human sin the earth groans under our feet. When God removes peace from the earth, the wickedness of the human heart inevitably produces the wars which lead to the horrible slaughter depicted in these particular judgments.

But there are three more seal judgments yet to come, and we now turn to them in Revelation 6-8:1. As we saw last time when we covered the first four of the seven seals, the seal judgments represent the first of three cycles of judgment found in the Book of Revelation. The trumpet and bowl judgments are yet to follow in Revelation 8-11 and 15-16. Each of these cycles of judgments views the entire period of time between Christ’s first coming and second advent from a different perspective. This period of time is variously described as the time of the end, the last days, or the thousand years. The seven seal judgments refer to events which occur between John’s time at the end of the first century until the present, and which will continue until Christ comes again on the last day.

There are two senses in which these cyclical judgments intensify. The trumpets are more intense in their severity than the seal judgments, and the bowl judgments are more intense than the trumpets. Each of

these cycles of judgment also intensifies within itself, meaning that these judgments intensify during the course of this present age, before coming to their culmination at the second coming of Jesus Christ. This is why Jesus spoke of the signs of the end as similar to birth pains. The signs intensify to the point it becomes impossible to tell which particular sign is the final harbinger of the end. We can't tell which contraction will be the last!

We should also take note of the fact in each of these cycles of judgment, there are seven individual judgments. Throughout the book of Revelation, the number seven symbolizes perfection or divine fullness. When these cycles of seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls run their course, God's wrath will come to an end with the second coming of the Jesus Christ, who removes the curse, brings about the final judgment, moving the redemptive drama to its final goal, a redeemed people and a new creation where there are no more tears, pain, sin or suffering and where God dwells with his people in his temple, just as he did in Eden before the Fall. One day, we shall see him face to face.

Therefore, in this section of Revelation, John maps out the general course of human history, setting it against the backdrop the broad panorama of redemption. John does predict specific historical events, such as a particular war, a particular earthquake, or particular event in Israel or the Middle East. Rather, through these vivid word pictures—characteristic of apocalyptic literature—John is showing us how Jesus Christ fulfills Old Testament prophecy, and that all wars, famines, earthquakes and human travail point us ahead to a final judgment yet to come. These things constantly remind us that because of Adam's Fall and human sin all is not right in the world. One day the Lord himself will return to undo the effects of human rebellion. Therefore, despite its mysterious character, the Book of Revelation is a book of hope, reminding us that God is in control of all things and that one day we will realize all of God's gracious covenant promises when all of creation bows before the Lamb who was slain.

**L**et us turn to our text and pick up where we left off last time with the fifth seal judgment, beginning in verse 9.

With the opening of the fifth seal, the scene dramatically shifts from earth to heaven. While the earth convulses and its people wreck havoc upon one other when peace is removed, it is only natural for God's people to wonder about their own fate, as well as that of those who have died at the hands of the Satanically-motivated beast. The saints in heaven cry out for justice, not spitefully nor because of a desire for revenge, but because they desire to see God's will done on earth as they have already witnessed it being done in heaven.<sup>1</sup> While the earth and its people cry out in the midst of the calamity brought about by the four horsemen of the seal judgments, the saints before the throne in heaven cry out as well.

According to John, "*when [the Lamb] opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'*" Not only does the scene shift from earth to heaven, this is the first mention of the altar. In the Old Testament, the tabernacle and the temple had two altars. One was in the courtyard, where the sacrificial animals were slain, the other was within the Holy Place. These altars are designed to teach us that sinful people can approach the Holy God only through means of a sacrifice for sin. But in heaven there is one altar. According to Book of Hebrews, the earthly altars were but copies and

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<sup>1</sup> See Poythress, [The Returning King](#), 116.

shadow of that which is in heaven (8:5) and in Hebrews 9:11 we read that “*when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation.*” It is to this heavenly altar that the prayers of the saints ascend when they cry out for God’s will to be done, “how long, O Lord?”<sup>2</sup>

John sees the souls of the martyred saints under this altar where sacrificial blood had been shed. This is not only proof that life continues on after death—the soul lives on even after the body dies—but these are the same people John sees in Revelation 20:4 during the thousand years: “*I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.*” They are in the presence of the Lamb, under the altar and before the throne, because they have already participated in the first resurrection. In John 5:24, Jesus told us, “*I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.*” Therefore, all Christian believers cross over from life to death—the first resurrection—when we are born again. Because we have already crossed from death to life in the new birth, when we die, we do indeed take our place in heaven with the martyrs who were killed by the Beast and who come to life only to reign with Christ for a thousand years.

While the martyrs cry out for God’s will to be done, we read in verse 11, “*Then each of [the martyrs] was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.*” Clothed in the righteousness of Christ, symbolized by the white robe, the saints in heaven anticipate that great and glorious day when the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowl judgments run their course. As John puts it in Revelation 14:13, “*Then I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.’*” The last elect sinner comes to faith in Jesus Christ when the judgments described in the seals are finally complete. Then the number of servants and brothers will be completed and God’s wrath will reach its fullness on the last day when Jesus Christ returns to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. God will save his people and he will remove the stain of sin from every corner of creation.

**T**he lament of the martyrs brings us to the sixth seal judgment, which describes the second coming of Jesus Christ.

In the fifth seal we learned that the judgments associated with the first four seal judgments—wars, famine, pestilence and death—will not come to an end until all of the martyrs have died and their full number is complete. But in the sixth seal we learn that when the end finally comes, God’s wrath will shake the earth. In fact, it will extend to the ends of the cosmos as the sky turns to darkness and the heavens roll up like a scroll.<sup>3</sup> This is a symbolic picture of events which John will later describe in Revelation 21:1, when he tells us, “*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.*”

According to John, “*I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun*

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<sup>2</sup> See Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 125.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 126-127.

*turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.*” As we have seen when we covered the seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor, John’s original audience knew first hand the destructive power of earthquakes. Severe quakes rocked Asia Minor in AD 17 and the Island of Cyprus in AD 76. Then in AD 79, the entire Roman world was shocked by the destruction of city of Pompeii.<sup>4</sup> Now John warns that a great earthquake, far greater than anything known to man, will yet rock the earth.

Certainly John not only has in mind the recent geological history of Asia Minor—which would have been familiar to all his readers—but more importantly John has in mind the Old Testament background of the wrath of God in which earthquakes are frequently connected to God’s coming to earth to deliver justice. Indeed, the ground quakes when God gives the law at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:18). Creation is said to shake when God comes as a warrior to lead his host into battle (Judges 5:4-5; Joel 2:10, Micah 1:4, Psalm 78:7-8). The earth shudders before the coming of the Lord to judge the wicked (Isaiah 13:13; 24:18-20; 34:4; Jeremiah 51:29; Ezekiel 38:20; Nahum 1:5). In all of these texts, the prophets foretell of a great earthquake which accompanies the Day of the Lord.<sup>5</sup> This great earthquake appears again in Revelation 11, in connection to the two witnesses and again in Revelation 16:18 when the angel pours out the seventh bowl of God’s wrath. These are all references to the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, these same cosmic signs appear in the Olivet Discourse when Jesus speaks of the signs of the end. After describing the signs of the end, Jesus speaks of those signs which will accompany his second advent. Jesus declares in Matthew 24:29-31, “*Immediately after the distress of those days,*” that is, the distress associated with the last days and scroll judgments, “*the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.*” “*At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.*” Clearly, Jesus and John are speaking of the same event. Therefore, when the sixth seal is opened, Christ returns in judgment, and when he does so the entire cosmos is purified from sin.

But while the Lord speaks of the angels gathering his elect at his return, in John’s vision we learn the fate of those who are not prepared to meet the Lord. According to verse 15, “*Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains.*” The fact that there are of seven kinds of people listed here is surely intended to remind us that God’s judgment upon humanity is complete and total.<sup>6</sup> No one will escape. The terror of facing Jesus Christ coming in judgment soon overwhelms these people like a flood. “*They called to the mountains and the rocks, `Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?`” No one!*

In Psalm 130, the Psalmist writes, “*If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But*

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<sup>4</sup> Bauckham, The Climax of Prophecy, 206-207.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 127; cf. Bauckham, Climax of Prophecy, 199-209.

<sup>6</sup> Poythress, The Returning King, 117.

*with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared . . . O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.”* While the redeemed need never fear the judgment of Christ—because Christ has died for our sins, removing the very record of them—those who are not Christ’s would rather be buried alive, then face the wrath of the Lamb! He has kept a record of their sins and they cannot stand in his presence.

**B**ut before John takes us to the scene of the lamb opening the seventh seal, there is a dramatic interlude in chapter 7. Having heard the frightening word about the judgment yet to come, God assures his people that he will protect them from the judgment which is coming upon the earth.

In Revelation 7:1, John sees four angels who restrain God’s wrath during the seal judgments as well as two images of God’s protection of his people. The first of these images is that of the twelve tribes of Israel and the reference to the 144,000 in verses 1-8. The second is found in verses 9-17, where John is given a vision of a great multitude in clothed in white robes. In verse 1, we read, *“After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: ‘Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.’”*

The four angels restrain God’s wrath against the earth until such time as all of God’s people are sealed. We read in Revelation 14:1 that this seal is the name of Christ and of God, and may be connected to Christian baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity. Thus God’s seal stands in direct contrast to its Satanic counterfeit, which is the Mark of the Beast.<sup>7</sup> God’s seal ensures the deliverance of his people, while the Mark of the Beast ensures the destruction of all who take it. While God’s wrath is continually poured out upon the earth through the seal judgments before the Lord’s return, God’s judgment is restrained for the sake of his people who are now sealed.

According to John, *“Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, 6 from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, 7 from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, 8 from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.”*

The total number sealed mentioned by John, the 144,000, is often the subject of much speculation. Since the twelve tribes are listed, some argue that this is a reference to the believing Jewish remnant, or to the Old Testament saints. But since they are sealed with the name of God and of Christ just as has been promised to the overcomers in the church of Philadelphia, and since they are called servants of God, the number 144,000 is more likely symbolic of the church, which includes believing Jews and Gentiles.

As a number of commentators have pointed out, this particular arrangement of the twelve tribes is nowhere found throughout the Old Testament. Then there is the fact that in Revelation 14, the 144,000 are said to be those purchased from the earth as first fruits to God and to the Lamb. Indeed, the Lamb shed his blood for people from every race and tribe and tongue under heaven. In fact, given the way in

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 129.

which the names of the tribes are arranged by John, “the order of the tribes in Revelation 7, symbolizes the reign of Jesus, from the tribe of Judah; the incorporation of outcasts; and the exclusion of idolaters from the covenant community which God shields from his terrible wrath.”<sup>8</sup> The 144,000 are symbolic therefore, of the church of Jesus Christ, purchased by the blood of the Lamb, clothed in his righteousness and sealed with God’s name, so as to be protected from God’s wrath which is coming upon the earth.

While verses 1-8 view the church from the perspective of the history of the covenant, which now includes Gentiles, the scene in verses 9-17, emphasize the fact that gospel has gone out to the ends of the earth and has brought all of God’s elect from every nation into the church of Jesus Christ. In verse 9, John now testifies about what he has seen, “*After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’*”

Therefore, the great covenant promise which God made to Abraham, “through you, all peoples of the earth will be blessed,” is gloriously fulfilled. Not only does this tell us that God has his elect among every race and includes people who speak every language, it also demonstrates that the number of the elect is not small. In fact, it is so large that John cannot count all of them! This is the church triumphant now enjoying its heavenly rest from its earthly labor and tribulation. Its members are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ and they hold palm branches in their hands while singing the heavenly Hosanna.

And this glorious scene of God’s redeemed people becomes yet another cause for worship. “*All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: ‘Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!’*”

The angels and elders sing a seven-fold refrain as the sight of the redeemed leads the heavenly choir to ascribe perfection to God and to the Lamb.

But the interlude reaches its conclusion in verse 13, when a question is put to John. “*Then one of the elders asked me, ‘These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?’ I answered, ‘Sir, you know.’ And he said, ‘These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’*” From this it is clear that the great tribulation is not limited to the end of time, but that the entire church age is a period of great tribulation for the people of God, who despite their tribulations, have been washed by the blood of the Lamb and covered with the righteousness of Christ.

Indeed, says John, “*they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them,*” which is symbolic of divine protection associated with the blessings listed in verse 16. “*Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst.*” This because Christ is the living bread and the living water which runs beneath the throne. “*The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat,*” because God shields them with his tent. “*For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*” These are words which require no explanation. All we can do

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 132.

after hearing them is to recite the seven-fold blessing of the heavenly choir given to God and to the Lamb. *Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!*

**A**nd so, with the scene of the church triumphant before us, the interlude is over. But the first cycle of judgment ends quite unexpectedly in the opening of the seventh seal in verse 1 of chapter 8.

John simply reports, "*When [the Lamb] opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.*" Now, you would think that after all that was described in the first six seals, when the cycle of seal judgments is completed, there would be a great climax at the end. Instead, there is only absolute silence for a time. But this too was foretold in the prophets. Zephaniah spoke of silence in connection with the day of the Lord: "*Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near.*" Habakkuk did the same: "*But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.*"

Once this first cycle of seal judgments is complete, God has redeemed his people, he has brought final judgment upon all those who reject his son. After the earth shakes, the cosmos shudders, then, the heavens roll up like a scroll and the choirs of heaven cease their singing. All creation stands in awe of him who is seated upon the throne. There is nothing left to say. Judgment has run its course, and because God has brought all things to their appointed end, for a time, there is only glorious silence in heaven. Amen!