

A Survey of Revelation

Week 6: The “Seal” Judgments and the Rapture Revelation 6:1-8:1

A Brief Overview of the Book of Revelation

A. Introduction to the Book (Revelation 1)

B. Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3)

C. The End of the World As We Know It: God’s Judgment Upon the World and Satan (Revelation 4-19:5)

1. The Vision of Heaven and the “Beginning of the End” (4:1-5:14)
2. The “Seal” Judgments and the Rapture (6:1-8:1) } *This week, we are here!*
3. The “Trumpet” Judgments (8:2-11:19)
4. The Conflict with the False Trinity (12:1-14:20)
5. The “Bowl” Judgments (15:1-16:21)
6. The End of the World (17:1-19:5)

D. A Whole New World: The Return of Christ and the New Heavens and the New Earth (Revelation 19:6-22:21)

1. The Return of Christ and the Millennium Kingdom (19:6-20:15)
2. The New Heavens and the New Earth (21:1-22:11)
3. Epilogue to Revelation (22:12-21)

Summary of Revelation 6:1-8:1

Following the vision of heaven, where John sees Jesus receive the 7-sealed scroll, [1] John then sees Jesus slowly open the first four seals on the scroll, plunging the earth into its final seven-year period and the “Great Tribulation.” After the first four seals are opened, [2] John sees the fifth and sixth seal opening, bringing the world even closer to the “Great and Terrible Day of the Lord.” But before the final seal is opened, [3] John witnesses the rapture of the church—along with a very mysterious 144,000.

[1] The First Four Seals and the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” (Revelation 6:1-8)

[2] The Fifth and Sixth Seal and the Beginning of God’s Judgment (Revelation 6:9-17)

[3] The Rapture of the Church and the 144,000 (Revelation 7:1-8:1)

[1] The First Four Seals and the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” (6:1-8)

After John sees Jesus receive a 7-sealed scroll, John then sees Jesus slowly open the first four seals of the scroll, plunging the earth into its final 7-year period and the “Great Tribulation.”

Introduction

- Remember what we talked about last week: the final events of this earth before the return of Christ will occur in a predetermined 7-year period, first talked about in Daniel 9:24-27. This period will begin with the **introduction of the anti-Christ**.
- The start of this 7-year period will be followed by two times of difficulty on this earth:
 - o The “**Great Tribulation**,” which is a period of difficulty brought about by the anti-Christ and his motivating influence, Satan. This occurs in the middle of a **final seven-year period on this earth** (after the “abomination of desolation”).
 - o The “**Great and Terrible Day of the Lord**,” which is a period of difficulty brought about by the wrath/anger of God against the unbelieving inhabitants of this earth.
- In my opinion, Revelation 6 primarily deals with the “**Great Tribulation**” and the **last seven years here on this earth** up until the “Great and Terrible Day of the Lord.” Revelation 6 covers:
 1. The appearance of the anti-Christ (Rev. 6:1-2)
 2. The abomination of desolation leading to “The Great Tribulation,” which includes:
 - the persecution of Christ-followers (Rev. 6:3-4)
 - a period of severe difficulty on this earth, including famine (Rev. 6:5-6)
 - the massacre of potentially billions of people (Rev. 6:7-8), specifically including those who have put their faith in Jesus (Rev. 6:9-11)
 3. And the “threshold” of the “Great and Terrible Day of the Lord” (Rev. 6:12-17).
- The catalyst for each of the above events is the breaking of one of the “seals” on the 7-sealed scroll of Revelation 5 by Jesus. **As Jesus breaks each seal, another calamity of the final 7-years is unleashed on this earth.**



- That leads us to the events of Revelation 6: after Jesus receives the scroll, he begins the process of opening it. Six seals are broken in Revelation 6. They fall into two categories: the first four are lumped together, and then the final two. We'll deal with the first four, first.

The First Four Seals and the Four “Horseman of the Apocalypse”

- The opening of the first four seals plunges the world into its final seven years.
- They bring about the “four horsemen of the apocalypse,” so called because the opening of each seal prompts God to send a “rider on a horse” who brings about some difficulty on this earth.



- Seal 1: The Appearance of the Anti-Christ (6:1-2)

I 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!"² 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. (Rev. 6:1-2 NIV)

- Here John describes a rider on a **white horse**, with a **bow**, who was given a **crown** and was “**bent on conquest**.”
- This seems like a description of the anti-Christ:
 - The “**white horse**” seems to refer to his “imposter” status: he masquerades as Christ, but is really bent on destruction.
 - The “**crown**” represents the ruler status he will have: consistently throughout Scripture, the anti-Christ is pictures as someone with immense human authority.
 - The fact that he was “**bent on conquest**” reveals his destructive nature; he may use force at some point to gain or consolidate power.
- **Seal 2: Persecution (6:3-4)**

When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!"⁴ Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword. (Rev. 6:3-4 NIV)

- The second horse is a red horse who was given power to “take peace from the earth and make people kill each other” (6:4).
- This is definitely a picture of the destructive ways that human beings turn against one another and fight one another, and could very specifically be a reference to the end-time persecution of God’s people brought about during the Great Tribulation.

- **Seal 3: Famine and Worldwide Difficulty (6:5-6)**

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.⁶ Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "Two pounds of wheat for a day's wages, and six pounds of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!" (Rev. 6:5-6 NIV)

- The third horse is black and represents a period of difficulty, particularly caused by famine—often an effect of the type of worldwide violence talked about in the previous horse. (Food was often measured during times of famine in the first century on scales, hence the rider holding scales in his hand—see Lev. 26:26.)
- The prices represented in v. 6 are exorbitant; they represent 10-12x's the normal prices for food. A mother or father in this season would have to choose between feeding himself or feeding his family each day; this may be why Jesus talks about how hard it will be for "nursing mothers" in this season (Matthew 24:19).
- Here the anti-Christ reveals his true colors; though originally his rise to power likely was because of a promise for prosperity, etc., his policies actually lead to worldwide hunger and starvation.
- Interestingly, there is also a symbol of God's protection; God will not allow the famine to touch all areas of production—"oil and wine" will be spared (Rev. 5:6).

- **Seal 4: Death and the Grave (6:7-8)**

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!"⁸ 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. (Rev. 6:7-8 NIV)

- The fourth and final horse is represented by a "pale" color: this refers to a yellowish-green color that was often used for the color of a corpse.
- The rider here is specifically named "death" and has "Hades"—the grave—following close behind.
- The rider is given the ability to kill ¼ of the population. This could be taken literally, or could symbolically refer to a limited number (in the "Trumpet" and "Bowl" judgments, this number is increased to 1/3 and then all of mankind).
- Though the sorts of the things that kills people mentioned in this passage—sword, famine, plague—have always been around, there will be an intensification of this in the last days.

Summary

- The opening of the first four seals unleash the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”:

Seal 1	Rev. 6:1-2	The White Horse	The Anti-Christ
Seal 2	Rev. 6:3-4	The Red Horse	Persecution
Seal 3	Rev. 6:5-6	The Black Horse	Famine
Seal 4	Rev. 6:7-8	The Pale Horse	Death and the Grave

- These horsemen seem to be a reference to the events surrounding the Great Tribulation—though they are indicative of events that have always occurred on this earth. There is just an intensification of them in the last days.
- There is one thing that is important to note: **the words “was given” is used repeatedly in this passage in reference to the power of the horsemen (Rev 6:2, 4 [two times], 8).** This is known theologically as the “divine passive” and refers to the fact that **although these horsemen do the work of Satan, God is ultimately sovereign over them. They would not have any power if God did not allow it to happen.** This is an uncomfortable—but important—truth.

[2] The Fifth and Sixth Seal and the Beginning of God's Judgment (Rev. 6:9-17)

After the first four seals are opened, John sees the fifth and sixth seal opening, bringing the world even closer to the "Great and Terrible Day of the Lord."

- Seals **five** and **six** are different in nature from the first four seals: as this scroll gets closer to being opened, and its contents get closer to being exposed, God is getting closer to bringing an end to Satan's work and bringing His own judgment upon the world.

- Seal Five: "How Long, O Lord?" (6:9-11)

When he 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.¹⁰ 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?"¹¹ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been. (Rev. 6:9-11 NIV)

- When the fifth seal is open, no calamity is experienced on earth. Instead, we are given a picture of heaven. Here, we see clearly a picture of Christian martyrs: those who had lost their lives for the sake of Christ. These could refer either specifically to those who were martyred during the Great Tribulation, or it could refer to all Christians who have lost their lives for the sake of Christ.
- There are four significant things about these martyrs.
 1. **These martyrs dwell "under the altar" of God.** This image comes from the sacrificial system, in which the blood of sacrifices is poured under the altar; their position under the altar represents that they were "sacrificed" for God. The Greek word translated "slain" in v. 9 is the same word used of Jesus as the "slain lamb" in Rev. 5:6. **Thus Christian martyrs are given a special place in heaven.**
 2. **They specifically ask for God's justice on those who killed them.** They essentially ask God to avenge their death—and God's own glory.
 3. **They are told that there is a "set number" of Christians whom God has ordained to be martyred.** In response to their request for justice, God gives them a "white robe" (symbolizing blessedness and purity) and tells them to wait until "full number" of Christians had been killed "just as they had been" (v. 11). This reveals that God has a predetermined number of Christians who will suffer and die for His sake. When this is done, God's final judgment begins.

- **Seal Six: “The ‘Threshold’ of the ‘Day of the Lord’” (6:12-17)**

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red,¹³ and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind.¹⁴ The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains.¹⁶ 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!”¹⁷ For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?” (Rev. 6:12-17 NIV)

- In direct request to the prayers of the martyrs in the fifth seal, the sixth seal is now open. When the sixth seal is open, we see imagery clearly related to God’s judgment and perhaps the “Great and Terrible Day of the Lord.”
- Note the devastation of these verses. John talks about:
 - an earthquake (v. 12)
 - the sun turning black (v. 12)
 - stars falling to the earth (v. 13)
 - the heavens receding “like a scroll” (v. 14)
 - “every mountain and island” being removed from its place (v. 14)
- It is debatable as to whether these references should be taken literally¹; but the idea behind them is clear. The events of this time will be devastating and unmistakable.
- So devastating are the events that “kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else” hide and ask to be killed.
 - There is special emphasis here on the “elite” of society; even the ones who usually “call the shots” in this life (and, in the Bible’s theology, are often oppressing the ones who are not “elite”) will be powerless against the judgment of God.
 - Their asking to be killed is a recognition of an awareness of how serious the judgment of God will be.
- Note also here the “wrath of the Lamb” (v. 16): Jesus also participate in His Father’s anger against the sinfulness of mankind.
- This is probably not the actual “day of the Lord,” but events immediately preceding it, in keeping with what we find in the prophet Joel:

¹ John’s language might be like us saying after a big earthquake “the whole earth shook.”

*I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke.³¹ The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood **before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.** (Joel 2:30-31 NIV)*

- Thus, we might think of the sixth seal as the “threshold” of the Day of the Lord: the scroll is almost fully open—it only has one seal left—and God’s full and final judgment is about to be unleashed.
- Whether or not Christians have been raptured out at this point is not yet known; chapter 7 and the “rapture” may occur concurrently with seal six or it may happen immediately following it.

Summary

- Thus the fifth and sixth seals represent a transition point in the final seven years of this earth: though the “Great Tribulation” may still be going on, God is beginning to bring His judgment on the earth.
- Fortunately, it is right at—or soon after—this time that the people of God receive some protection from the destruction of this earth.

[3] The Rapture of the Church and the 144,000 (Rev. 7:1-8:1)

But before the final seal is opened, John witnesses the rapture of the church—along with a very mysterious 144,000.

The Rapture of the Church

- Right at or after the opening of the sixth seal,² John is given another vision of heaven. Here he sees two events: one described in Revelation 7:2-8 and another in Revelation 7:9-17.
 - The second event (Rev. 7:9-17) I believe is the rapture of the church. This group:
 - o Is “innumerable” (Revelation 7:9).³
 - o Is clearly the “church”—those who have put their faith in Jesus. They wear “white robes” (v. 9) and are described as those who “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (v. 14).
 - o And they specifically are said to “come out of the great tribulation” (v. 14).
- ... all of these to me spell the rapture of Christians here on this earth.
- But this is not the only group that John witnesses in heaven. There is another group, as well.

The 144,000

- *Before* John sees the church raptured, he sees a group of 144,000 people, “from all the tribes of Israel” (Revelation 7:4).
- But who is this group? While various theories have been proposed over the years, in my opinion the “plain meaning of the text” suggests that they are representative of the Jewish people: **the 144,000 refer to the literal, physical descendants of the original people of Israel, whom God will save at the end of time.**

² The “after this” of Revelation 7:1 does not necessarily mean that only after the sixth seal was opened the church was raptured. It could simply refer to the order of the visions John received. *First*, John saw the sixth seal being opened and the group on this earth. *Then*, after that vision, he was given the vision of heaven. But the church could have been raptured right at or before the opening of the sixth seal.

³ FYI – there are 2.5 billion people who call themselves Christians currently living on this earth. Definitely a number that would be impossible to count if they all stood before us right now!

- This is the answer to the question, “**What about Israel?**”
 - Remember, in the Old Testament, Israel was God’s chosen people, and God made a number of promises to them: and God made it clear that a number of His promises to them were *based solely on His character, not on anything that they did*.
 - Many of these promise remain unfulfilled by the time of the New Testament. So how is God going to fulfill His promises?
 - Well, Paul dealt with this explicitly in Romans 9-11. **He made it clear that at the end of time, God would return to Israel and fulfill the promises He made to them.** This would include making sure a “remnant” would be saved.

*For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery-- so that you will not be wise in your own estimation-- that a **partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;**²⁶ **and so all Israel will be saved;** ...from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers;...²⁹ **for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.** (Rom. 11:25-26, 29)*

- The 144,00 is the fulfillment of the promises God made! At the end of time, God is going to return to Israel and save them!
 - Without exception, “Israel” (Rev. 7:4) in the New Testament always refers to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The specificity of the “twelve tribes” also makes clear that the literal descendants of Israel are being discussed here.⁴
 - Also, compare Zephaniah 3:12-13...

*But I will leave within you the meek and humble. The remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the LORD.¹³ **They will do no wrong; they will tell no lies. A deceitful tongue will not be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid.**” (Zeph. 3:12-13)*

...with this description of the 144,000 in Revelation 14:1, 5:

*Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ... **No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.** (Rev. 14:1, 5 NIV)*

⁴ Much has been made of the unique listing of the 12 tribes—for example, Dan and Ephraim are left out, whereas Manasseh and Joseph (of the same tribe) are listed. Though various proposals have been presented over the years, most of it is speculation since we don’t know why these specific tribes were chosen. Most importantly, perhaps, it’s important to recognize that often when the twelve tribes are listed in the Bible, there are some variations in the names listed.

Thus, **Revelation picks up on the universal teaching of the Bible that God will return to His chosen people at some point and will save them.** The 144,000 is the fulfillment of that promise. They are the end-time people of Israel who God will save through their turning to Jesus:

[The 144,000] follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among mankind and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. (Rev. 14:4 NIV)

- This likely does not mean that only 144,000 Jewish people will be saved; instead, the number is likely representative of a large (but not “innumerable”) number:

$$(12 \text{ tribes})^2 \times 1000 = 144,000.$$

The Role of the 144,000 in Revelation

- But what is the role of the 144,000? A few interesting things to note:
 - o It is clear that they are on earth in Revelation 7 (see Rev. 7:3) in contrast to the church/innumerable multitude that is heaven (see Rev. 7:9). This means that they are not raptured with the church/innumerable multitude. Why?
 - o However, they are “sealed” in Revelation 7. The Greek for “seal” referred to a signet ring that monarchs of the time affixed to give validity to certain types of documents: it was used to authenticate certain documents. **Thus the seal is God marking out who of Israel are “his”—the remnant He said He would preserve!** This seal also specifically protects them from future parts of the difficulties of Revelation (see Revelation 9:4).
 - o Finally, they seem to experience their own rapture in Revelation 14:1-3.
- So what is going on?
 - o I believe that God’s church gets raptured at the exact point that the “fullness of the Gentiles” has ended—sometime near the end of the Great Tribulation.
 - o When this happens, the remnant of Israel (the 144,000 who were sealed) who had not yet put their faith in Jesus, will “wake up” and decide to put their faith in Him.
 - o They will remain on this earth—perhaps serving as witnesses to Jesus, with the hope of saving some—until right before the most intense of God’s judgments are unleashed upon the earth (the “bowl judgments” of Revelation 16), when they themselves are removed (Revelation 14:1-3).
 - o And in that way, God will remain faithful to Israel, ***just as He always promised!***

Application: God Stays True to His Promises

- There are some people who do not believe that God has a plan for Israel: that the church has *replaced* Israel.
 - o I'll be honest: I would find it hard to worship—and believe—in a God who decided to abandon His chosen people.
 - o Repeatedly in the Old Testament God made promises to Israel. And those promises were not conditioned on anything but His character.
 - o If God all of a sudden completely turned His back on Israel, that would make God hard to trust: because it means that God could at any point change His mind.
- Fortunately, I believe that the Bible teaches that God has a future place for Israel in His plan of salvation. Of course He does! "The gifts and callings of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29).
- This means that we can trust for ourselves any promise that God has made.

Question: What promise has God made that you need to be reminded of today?

- That God has given us what we need to obey Him and escape temptation (1 Cor. 10:13)?
- That whenever we feel anxious we can turn to Him and experience peace (Phil. 4:6-7)?
- That we can be content no matter what the circumstances (Phil. 4:10-13)?
- That God will never leave us or forsake us—directly spoken of in the context of money and finances (Heb. 13:5)?
- That we are "more than conquerors" in everything (Romans 8:37)?

Don't forget to email questions!
questions@friends.church

Homework for next week: Read Revelation 8-11 at least twice this week.