

The Seven Seals

Revelation 6

Turn to Revelation 6. What do you think is really going on in the world? What explains the way things are? Does it seem that everything is moving toward chaos? Is everything falling apart?

Governments that were stable don't seem stable anymore. People come to power that it is hard to trust. World finances seem precarious, teetering on the edge of disaster. If anything starts to crumble, there will be a global depression – it sounds like that to me sometimes.

Global warming, whatever the cause, is a part of this. The miserable effects of human industry and human greed on our earth are a part of this. And it is a problem when people don't care.

Morally as well things seem to be getting worse. People don't care how they live, fewer things are wrong. Is it all sliding toward the edge? Is that the real story? Is the bottom line that everything is moving toward a terrible end?

Or think about Christians in the world. In some parts of the world, Christians are the enemy. In Canada and many places we are tolerated, but viewed as off-beat, sort of like geeks, out of step with the real world, for some unexplainable reason we hang on to an ancient religion that does not make sense anymore.

Even in Canada sometimes we're seen as a problem, usually not, but certainly on the edges of what's really going on in the world.

This makes us want to lie low, to cause as little fuss as possible, to stay under the radar so that we won't be noticed, we want to compromise whenever we can, so we don't draw attention to ourselves, because if we do it probably will not be happy attention.

John's seven churches certainly lived in a world like all this. The world had the same kinds of troubles, and the hostility for them was worse than for us, and the messages to the churches tell us that several of them were compromising too much, and that was a problem.

By the way, we will not go over the seven messages in Rev 2-3 in this series. For two reasons: One is that there are not enough Sundays before June to take 7 Sundays for Rev 2-3 and also cover the rest of Revelation. The other is that the confusion about Revelation is not about Rev 2-3. So we're not going to stop there. I don't like that, and will do them another time. Not now.

Back to John's seven churches. Rev was written to help *them* understand their world and live right. Their world had troubles. There were wars, and they had famines, and they had plagues, too. Believers did not escape these things. Was everything coming unglued?

On a quiet Lord's day on a barren island, the Holy Spirit came to John and a voice said, "I'll show you what's going on." "What's going on" is a Throne in heaven.

John knew as soon as he saw this Throne that this was the One Throne that ruled all. And there was Someone on the Throne, who is eternal and who is coming to earth.

What John knows immediately is that this Throne is the center of the universe, and that the One on the Throne rules everything. There's a rainbow around the Throne, which means this One on the Throne is the God that made a covenant with Noah to watch over the earth.

From the Throne come flashes of lightening, and rumblings and thunder, and in front of the Throne lamps are blazing. These signs do not mean God is angry. Those all happened when God made the covenant with Israel in Moses' day, Exodus 19-20 and Deut 5, lightening and loud sounds and thunders and smoke and fire.

That's where God said, "If you will be my people, I will be your God," and Israel said, "we will be your people, and you will be our God!" This is One the God who binds himself to his people.

And what is happening in this Throne Room? At the center of our universe? They are singing to this God, bowing before him, praising him for his creation and for his plans for creation. THAT is what is happening at the center of our universe.

Then John sees that the One on the Throne, who is the God of Israel, has a scroll in his hand, sealed with seven seals. After a difficult search for someone worthy to take it, the Lamb comes and takes that scroll.

He's the Lion of Judah that conquered, and the slaughtered Lamb that lives. He takes the scroll, which means that he's the One who will take creation to its proper and wonderful destiny.

And then what happens? More praise, more worship. They worship the Lamb because he was slaughtered, and he used his blood to buy people for God, from every people and nation.

He made these people (and that's us, don't miss that) a kingdom, and he made us priests to serve God. We are now a kingdom and priests. The angels praise the Lamb for this.

The end of Rev 5 takes us to the destiny of Creation. In that last song they praise the One on the Throne and the Lamb. But the thing about the last song is: who is singing? Every created thing, everywhere: in heaven, on earth, under the earth, on the sea, in the sea. Creation has arrived.

So, what is really going on in the world? Is disorder and disaster taking over the world? No. At the real center of the universe is a Throne, and at that Throne they praise God and the Lamb because everything about creation is moving along just as God planned it.

And these groups, these churches, that gather on the Lord's Day to worship God and the Lamb – are they out of step with the world? Are they on the edge of what is really going on in the world? No, we are right at the center of the real action of the whole universe. We could not be more lined up with the center. WE could not be more in step with the visible and invisible universe.

We gather in this space every Lord's Day to sing to God and the Lamb, to worship him with our offerings, to eat the bread and drink the cup, to hear God's words. It's how we remind ourselves of the center of the universe. We do it to join ourselves to the center of the universe.

We are in front of that Throne, but we are all blindfolded. We can see, but we are blindfolded. But we are persuaded that the Throne is real, and the One on it, and the Lamb, and we are bought and paid for and freed by that very Lamb, so we worship the One on the Throne who we do not see, just as our bought and paid for brothers and sisters have been doing for thousands of years.

Then, in Rev 6, the Lamb starts breaking the seals of that scroll, the scroll that brings creation to its destiny. What happens when the seals comes off? Trouble. Big trouble. War, famine, and plague. But if this is the Lamb taking the seals off this book, is the world becoming unglued? No! Are the foundations being destroyed? No! Is disorder and disaster taking over? No! No! No!

If this is the Lamb taking the seals off, then God and the Lamb are bringing creation to its proper and wonderful completion. God's plan is moving along. In the words of Jesus, this is just birth pangs, the painful labour that produces new life.

First Four Seals – Rev 6:1-8

Some imagine 2000 years between the end of Rev 5 and beginning of Rev 6, but no reason for that. A new vision began in 4:1, John taken into the heavenly Throne Room. That vision continues with “and I saw ...” (in Greek), in 5:1, 5:6, 5:11, 6:1, and 6:12. In 7:1 it says “after these things I saw ...” which means John sees something new. Rev 4-5-6 are one unit.

The first four seals describe war, famine, and plague. John's 7 churches saw all of those things. The four seals are not about the future, they are telling us how to understand what's been happening all along, specifically since Christ was exalted to God's Throne.

John in Revelation gets these four horsemen from Zechariah 1 (vv8-15) and 6 (vv1-8). And Zechariah for his part seems to get this from Ezekiel 14, and all the way back to Moses in Leviticus 26. These are judgements from God on the world, both punishing the world for its rebellion, and telling the world that what the world is doing is not working.

(The first horseman, the one on a white horse with a bow who goes out to conquer, confuses me. It confuses many, I've heard many explanations, and don't know which one to pick. Some think it might represent something good, like the gospel going out, and I doubt that, I think it is dark and evil as two to four, but I will say no more about it, because I don't know about the first one.)

Christians are not spared these plagues. Believers also suffer under war, famine, and plague. But this does not mean that the Lord has left us. **Remember** that John the writer of Revelation is himself our brother in the trouble and kingdom and endurance that come in Jesus.

Remember that Jesus Christ is the Ruler of the kings of the earth. **Remember** that **HE** has the keys of death and the place of the dead. **Remember** that he walks among the churches and holds them in his right hand. **Remember** that the troubles of these four horsemen are God bringing creation to its joyful destiny! God wants to encourage us with this book.

OT Background to the four horsemen – 4 OT texts

1, Leviticus 26:18-28 Moses names four punishments from God to Israel if Israel rejects God's ways: famine, wild beasts, sword, and plague. Between each God says, "If you still will not listen to me, then ... (more trouble)." That is, the troubles will end if the people repent.

"Seven times" is mentioned in four places: vv18, 21, 24, 28. Revelation has 7 seals, trumpets, thunders (sealed up) and bowls. There might be a connection.

2, Ezekiel 14:12-21 God's judges Jerusalem. What Moses promised occurs in Ezekiel's day. Four afflictions: famine, wild beasts, sword, and plague. These are God's four dreadful judgment (v21).

3, Zechariah 1:8-15. Zechariah writes 60-70 years after Ezekiel, after God has judged his people. Zechariah sees in a vision a man with horses of several colours behind him. God sent them throughout the earth. They found the whole world at rest and peace. An angel asked God to have mercy on Jerusalem and Judah. God responded kindly to the angel. God said he was angry with the nations, they were too harsh with his people. (To be continued in Zech. 6.)

4, Zechariah 6:1-8. Chariots with horses of four different colours go out from the presence of the Lord, to go throughout the whole earth. (Note that the chariots are also the four winds of heaven. This becomes relevant at the beginning of Revelation 7. Holding back the four winds in Rev 7 is the same as holding back the four chariots.)

Therefore: The four chariots are going throughout the earth to take rest and peace from the earth. They are doing this as God's judgement on the nations for their cruelty to his people. The four plagues are not mentioned in Zechariah, although Zechariah probably has Leviticus and Ezekiel in mind.

5, Revelation 6. The first four seals are four horses of different colours. They bring: conquest, sword, famine, and plague. The end of the fourth seal mentions the same four as Moses and Ezekiel: sword, famine, plague, wild beasts. John in Revelation uses all four texts above, though as usual does not follow any exactly. He gets the four judgment plagues from Moses and Ezekiel, and horses of four colours from Zechariah, and that this is now aimed at the nations. For cruelty to his people, it seems.

The Fifth Seal – 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. 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?" 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.*

The altar here is the incense altar which was close to the ark of the covenant, which had the cherubim with wings (representing the four living ones) on the atonement cover, where God's throne was. This is not the sacrifice altar that was outside the tabernacle, it is the incense altar.

The souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God – Revelation speaks like this several times, and most think it means martyrs first, but that it probably includes all believers who resist sin and compromise when they are suffering. Which is quite a few of us.

V10 *They called out in a loud voice.* This prayer is not a whisper in heaven, not faint in the background. It is right beside God's Throne, and it is loud.

There are five songs to God in Rev 4-5. Four of them just tell us what they say. Only one of the five uses "loud voice," when the millions of angels sing that the Lamb is worthy. There we read that they "*said in a loud voice.*" But these in seal #5 saints "*call out in a loud voice,*" more intense than "*said.*" That is, everyone there hears this prayer, these saints are urgent.

"*How long.*" Even in heaven, the saints pray "how long." That's remarkable. Here on earth we often think God is taking too long to get around to his business. Ps 13 begins with "how long" four times. And in heaven they call this out in a loud voice, right in front of him: "how long?"

Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Sovereign Lord, holy and true. In different words, "Sovereign Lord, because you are holy and true, you should not wait to judge the earth and avenge our blood."

This might troubles us. Jesus taught us to love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us. That still stands. But we must absorb this: what WE do with our enemies, and what GOD does with our enemies, are not the same. God said, "vengeance is mine, I will repay." That comes from Moses, in Deut 32, and Paul wrote that to the church in Romans 12.

A follower of Christ never gets even, never pays people back, never gets revenge. Jesus did not try to even or pay people back. He let himself be wronged. Justice is God's business, and God's alone. But it IS his business.

The NT has another prayer like this, in the teaching of Jesus. Jesus told his followers: "*Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night for justice against their enemies? I'm telling you, he will see that they get justice, and he will hurry!*" Luke 18. Jesus told us that if we pray like this from earth, God itches to do what we requested, and will.

These saints with the Lord are calling out in a loud voice **from the incense altar**. In Rev 5, the 24 elders worshipped the Lamb with **golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints**. And do the saints pray for in Rev 5, providing the incense before the Throne?

At least a part of it is this: *“How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”* They were told to wait a little longer.

The Sixth Seal – 6:12-16 - *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, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. 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. 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?”*

This seal is God answering that prayer for justice. These verses use OT texts about the final day of the Lord, mostly Isaiah, but other prophets as well. This picture describes the cosmos disintegrating. Heaven and earth are become unglued, they are ending. That is, the sixth seal takes us to the very end this earth. Life as we know it on this earth ends with the sixth seal.

Seals one to five were all taking place when John wrote this, and they are still all taking place. But the sixth seal take us to the very End. The seventh bowl, in Rev 16, has the same events. A voice from Throne says, “It’s over!” There also we have a severe earthquake, as here. There also the islands and the mountains lose their places, and we read of the fury of God’s wrath.

Revelation takes us to the End repeatedly. 7 – 8 times, Revelation tells us how this age will End. At the end of Rev 5, every living creature praises God and the Lamb. That’s at the End. Here, everything is destroyed. That also is the End, just before the new heaven and new earth.

The sixth seal is God answering loud prayer of the fifth seal. In the fifth seal, the saints at God’s Throne prayed for justice. They were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of martyrs was in. By the sixth seal, the full number of martyrs is in, and God answers the prayer. The sixth seal is God answering that prayer.

God is judging the earth and avenging his people’s suffering. In Revelation, God’s people have nothing to fear from God himself. God is angry, but not with his people. God’s people will have trouble from the dragon, and the beast, and the prostitute. But not from God.

Seventh seal – 8:1. John takes a detour between the 6th and 7th seals. That happens also between the 6th and 7th trumpets, and also the bowls. This detour is Rev 7, the 144,000 and the great crowd in white robes. We’ll talk about that next week.

Rev 8:1 – *When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.*

What does the silence mean? There are as many guesses about this as with the first seal, and I will do the same thing. I don't know. In the sequence of Revelation, what should happen here is the new heaven and the new earth. But that is not mentioned here. Don't know what it means.

The one thing we know is that the 7th seal does come off. All the seals will come off. They are not all off yet. I pretty sure one to five are now off, six and seven are not off yet. But they will all come off, and the Lamb will take creation to the completion that God planned from the start.

Summary: At the center of the universe is a Throne, and the One on the Throne is eternal, and he rules heaven and earth, he is the God who makes promises to his people, and he's coming to earth. In this throne room they praise him for creating everything, and for his plans for creation.

And they praise the Lamb that he was slaughtered, and in that way he bought us for God, people like us from every place on earth. They praise the Lamb, and we do, because he is the One to bring creation to its happy destiny. WE need to know that this is going on all the time, and right now, at the center of the universe.

And the troubles of the world around us, which we do not escape, are the Lamb taking the seals off the book and bringing creation to its fulfillment. And the saints in heaven are calling out to God in a loud voice, "How long?" God hears them, and is moving things along to answer them.

When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do? They can take heart. The Lord is in his holy temple, the Lord is on his heavenly Throne (Ps 11). Jesus to his disciples: in the world you will have trouble. Take heart; I have overcome the world (Jn 16). Amen.