

Revelation 6:1–8:1

Opening the Seven Seals

A World Mess

The World in the News

Undoubtedly you have heard the news of the last week or two as I have.

You've seen the photos and the film clips.

Such as those of the devastating bushfires in Western Australia.

The flattened, hollowed out, or charred remains of 121 homes or other structures.

The devastation on lives, property, animals and the over 67,000 hectares of land burnt is overwhelming.

Locals talk of a fire that was terrible, devastating, and huge.

Or perhaps you've been shocked by today's news of yet another terrorist attack, this time in Istanbul.

Or the stories emerging from the brutal war and its affects in Syria.

Maybe you've heard the stories or seen the shocking images of starving residents in Madaya, a city under siege by Syrian regime forces since July.

Stories of people surviving by eating boiled grass or local cats and dogs.

Of others starving to death as a result of being caught in the middle of opposing forces.

Friends, these stories although devastatingly visible in our technological world are not new.

They have been repeated over and over again in human history.

They are pictures of our world.

Portraits of humanity.

Posters of a world mess.

And today we are going to get a big perspective on these matters.

That big perspective is going to come from the book of Revelation, from chapters 6 and 7.

The perspective will come from God.

It will brim full of theology.

It will be told in ancient images but with amazing echoes of our own world.

So, let's get started.

Let's hear from God about our world.

A Backdrop to the World

Friends, in order to understand this last book of the Bible, I am increasingly of the view that you need to understand the first book of the Bible.

In fact, you need to particularly understand the first three or four chapters of Genesis.

So, let me remind you of the story that is told there.

The story begins in a garden.

A secluded garden in a newly created world.

A garden set up by God as a place where humans could live.

Where they could live in harmony with him.

In harmony with each other.

In harmony with the environment in which he had placed them.

A paradisaical place, created by a good God.

Into this place come a serpent.

Characteristically, he deceives the woman.

The man joins in.

Together they act independently.

They do what is best in their own eyes and disobey God's word.

As a result, harmony give place to disharmony.

Relationships are now fraught.

Humans find their relationship with God damaged.

Their relationship with each other is similarly strained.

And their relationship with the environment into which he has placed them is now fractured.

But there is more.

In a curse uttered by God to the serpent, there is ominous threat and yet also hope.

God promises that life will now consist of enmity between the serpent and the offspring or seed of the woman.

In Genesis 3:15, God utters these words to the serpent...

He says...

*¹⁵... I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel." [Genesis 3:15; NIV]*

Then the Lord God cast the couple out of the garden.

He placed cherubim and flaming swords at the boundary of the garden to guard the way to the tree of life.

Then, in chapter 4 of Genesis, we hear about life outside the garden.

The conflicts and disharmony founded in the garden find expression in this new environment.

Although brothers should exist together in harmony, there is jealousy, sin crouching at the door, and murder enacted.

Right from the beginning, the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent struggle.

This is the backdrop we need to keep in mind as we study Revelation.

It is largely addressed to this world outside of Eden.

A world under the curse of God and under the influence of the evil one.

However, it is also addressed to a world after the emergence of the offspring of the woman, the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We will see this spelt out in later chapters of Revelation.

However, at the moment, I need to make sure that you understand this context.

This is the theological backdrop against which our chapters are written.

And at times you will need to understand this backdrop in order to understand what is going on.

That is particularly true of these passages that we start looking at today.

Remembering Where We Have Been

Revelation 1:1-8

Okay, with this larger background painted, let's now remember where we have been these last three talks.

Please open your Bibles at page 1 of the book of Revelation.

You'll find it on page 1236 of the pew Bibles.

Look at the first verse.

Literally it reads...

An apocalypse of Jesus Christ...

Now, the word 'apocalypse' literally means an unveiling, a disclosure, a revelation.

So, that's what the book is.

It is an unveiling from Jesus Christ.

Or even an unveiling of Jesus Christ.

Whatever it is, Jesus is at its core.

Next, we learnt that there was a long chain involved in this revelation.

God the Father is the origin of it.

He gives it to Jesus, his Son.

It is made clear by God's angel.

That angel brings it to God's servant, John.

But that's not the end.

There are other servants who are the end goal.

God gave this revelation to Jesus who passed it on to his servant John so that other servants might know what must happen very soon.

And that includes us.

So, it's a revelation of Jesus Christ that has the servants of Jesus Christ as its intended audience.

It is therefore for all of us who believe in Jesus and want to serve him.

And we heard that the heart of this message is the word of God

That's at its heart.

The gospel.

God's word.

The testimony of Jesus Christ.

That's what John saw.

That's what he wanted to pass on to us.

And he did it for us by putting this revelation in letter form.

Revelation 1:9–3:22

In chapter 1, verses 9–20, he tells us of what he saw in a vision.

It was of the Son of Man walking among his churches.

Then, in chapters 2 and 3, we hear what he was to relay to each of seven churches in Asia.

The pattern of letter to each church was somewhat similar.

And it demonstrates to us that the Lord Jesus, the heavenly Son of Man, oversees his church.

He knows what is going on in each of these churches.

What's more, he knows that they know that he sees and has communicated.

He also tells us that he reward the victorious, those who overcome.

Revelation 4-5

Then we come to Revelation 4 and 5.

They give us a sneak peek into heaven's throne room.

First, we are introduced to God the Creator King, worthy of the praise of all creation.

This happens in chapter 4.

In chapter 5, we find that God holds in his hands a scroll which holds his secret plans.

It has seven seals on it.

We are told that only someone worthy can open it.

We are also told that the worthy one is the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

We are then surprised to find that the worthy Lion is actually a lamb that has been slaughtered but remains standing.

Upon finding this out, heaven erupts with the same sort of praise being directed toward him as was directed toward God himself.

In verse 13, he who sits on the throne and the Lamb are worshipped in the same breath and with the same words.

This Lamb, descended from Judah, is able to open the seals containing the plans of God for his world.

We know that in the end he will share the throne with God the Father.

This is the goal to which God is headed.

Universal worship in the new heaven and the new earth.

Opening the Seven Seals (Revelation 6:1–8:1)

What's Going On Here?

A General Pattern

That brings us to our chapters for tonight.

Now, again, I ask that you have your Bibles open so that you can follow with me and check that I'm being faithful to the text of Scripture.

Search the Scriptures with me.

Our chapters tonight will focus on the seven seals.

Then will come the seven trumpets.

Then the seven bowls.

The pattern we see with the seals is somewhat similar to that which we see with the trumpets and the bowls

So, let me talk about this pattern.

The first stage is the first four of the seven.

They come in quick succession and look at though they belong together.

They concern things on earth.

That is, they concern life outside the garden.

Life in a world of sin and arising out of human sin.

In other words, the focus on the sorts of things that face most people throughout history.

That's the first four.

This first four are followed by two others: five and six.

Again, five and six should be taken together to give one picture.

And the focus of that picture is the very significant and deleterious spiritual effect of self-centred, human centredness on world history.

In the end, the first six of the seven therefore flow from human failure under the influence of evil forces.

Satan deceived humanity.

Humans failed.

This created a world out of plumb as is outlined in the first four.

But it also created a world in which there is deep division between those humans allied with God and those opposed to God.

If we were to use the language of Genesis, five and six show us a world deeply divided between those linked to the seed of the woman and those linked to the serpent and his seed.

The focus shifts in five and six.

It shifts toward the end of history and find focus there.

Oh, but we've missed the final one.

The seventh bowl or the seventh trumpet.

It simply functions as an introduction to the next series of judgments.

For the bowls, that happens in chapter 8, verse 1.

The Process

Okay, now I want you to look at the process.

Please look at chapter 6, verse 1.

Look at what happens.

Imagine the scroll.

The Lamb picks open the seals one by one.

The scroll cannot be read until all seven have been removed.

So, what happens after each of the seals has been removed is not a reading of the scroll.

No, that happens when all seven seals have been removed.

Let me show you by using my made-up scroll.

Here it is.

Imagine that the elastic bands are the seals.

I can remove one seal.

But that won't allow me to read the scroll.

No.

I have to wait for all seals to be removed before I can read the scroll.

That's what I think is going on here.

So, between now and Sunday, why don't you read ahead and see if you can work out when that happens.

Anyway, that's the big picture and that's the process.

Now let's take a look at the seven seals.

Seals 1-4

Seal 1: A White Horse

Look at verse 1.

John hears one of the four living creatures say, in a voice like thunder, 'Come!'

Actually, it could equally mean, 'Go!'

Whichever it is, the command is for the horses and their riders.

Now, in Revelation it's not just numbers that are important.

So are colours.

And here we have four horses of four colours.

The first colour is white.

Now, for us in our world, white is the colour for purity.

Not so here.

Here it is the colour for victory or conquest.

We'll see that later when we hear of various people clothed in white.

They are people who are victorious or conquering.

Anyway, that's what this white horse and its rider is about.

The rider has a bow.

He is given a crown of rule.

He rides out on his white steed as a conqueror bent on conquest.

This is the world of military endeavour and violence.

Conquering.

Seal 2: A Red Horse

Then the second seal is broken and another horse is commanded to come or go.

This one is fiery red.

Red is the colour of blood.

And sure enough, the rider of this horse engages in conflict of a military and violent sort.

He takes peace from the earth and makes people kill each other.

His weapon is a large sword.

Seal 3: A Black Horse

Then the third seal brings out a black horse and his rider.

He holds a pair of scales.

Voices call for extraordinary prices for goods.

The black horse and his rider stand for severe famine resulting in economic manipulation.

The result?

Hardship for most but luxury for that minority controlling the market.

Seal 4: A Pale Horse

Then the four seal is opened.

Out comes a pale horse.

The sense is pale green, the colour of a corpse.

This is borne out by the rider of the pale green horse.

His name is Death.

He is closely succeeded by Hades, the ruler of the dead.

They are given power over a quarter of the earth.

That power is to kill by sword, by famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

This is the appalling aftermath of war.

Slaughtered people, starved people, people belittled and kill by lack and disease.

Then finally, those who were in the garden given authority over the animals are overrun by them.

Friends, for time immemorial in human history this has been the pattern.

We are seeing it in our day.

It is played out in rickety ships ... with people buying life vests filled with cardboard rather than buoyancy ... with towns where children eat dogs, cats, and grass 25 kilometres from the luxury residence of the one who keeps the war going.

Friends, this is not the world created good by God.

No.

This is life outside the garden in a sin affected, Satan deceived world.

And it affects the four corners of that world.

Seal 5

Let us now turn to the breaking of the fifth seal.

In apocalyptic, the number four is often the number for the earthly sphere.

Perhaps it reflects the term 'the four corners of the world'.

But with seal 5, we move into the spiritual realm.

In fact, the focus is shifted back to the heavenly court room.

An altar is there.

And under it are the souls of those who had been slain because of their gospel focus, their gospel loyalty.

They were slain because of the word of God and the testimony that they had maintained.

And they cry out from under the altar in verse 10...

'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood.'

The cry, 'How long?!' is common in the Bible.

It is common in a fallen world.

What is desired is that God's people want to see God fully establish and display the justice that they know to be his by nature.

The answer is silence.

We do not know how long.

What we do hear in verse 11 is that their number has yet to be added to.

In the meantime, each is given a white robe.

Perhaps they had been victorious in death and the white robe is the acknowledgment of this.

Seal 6

Then we come to verse 12.

The time has come for the sixth seal to be broken.

Look at the language.

There are earthquakes.

The sun is turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair.

The moon turns blood red.

The stars fall to earth.

Earth and heaven are in upheaval.

This is the language of the prophets about the end of the world.

Look at verse 15.

People of every class and status recoil in horror at the prospect of facing God.

In verse 16, they would rather have the mountains and rocks fall on them than to be faced with the true and living God who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.

There is no attempt at repentance.

In its place is terror at the coming of God.

Just like sinful Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:8), they only want to run and hide to avoid the coming judgment.

Seal 7

¹When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. [Revelation 8:1; NIV]

An Interlude

Overview: Two Focii

At this point we expect the opening of the seventh seal.

However, it does not happen.

Instead, with chapter 7 we come to an interlude.

In this interlude the focus falls on what John hears and sees.

In verse 1 he sees four angels.

In verse 2 he sees another angel who has **the seal** of the living God.

Then, in verse 4 he hears of the number who are **sealed**.

In my view these two 'seeing's in verses 1 and 2 belong together and they deal with what John 'hears' about in verse 4, that is, the sealing of the 144,000.

So, foci 1 is the issue of the sealing of the 144,000

Now look down to verse 9.

John looks again.

This time he looks at a great multitude.

Then, finally, look at verse 13.

Literally, this reads...

And one of the elders said to me...

In other words, he hears an elder speak to him and he interacts with him on the issue of the identity of the white-robed multitude.

In my view, this looking and this hearing belong together as well.

And they focus on the huge multitude before the throne.

Foci 1: The Sealing

Let's turn our attention to these two foci for a moment.

You see, there is much debate and much confusion over both issues.

Let's see if we can work it out.

First, let's look at foci 1.

Let's ask ourselves what sealing is all about.

Now, I think that the best way is to see if there are hints within Revelation itself.

Turn in your Bibles to Revelation 13:17.

Later in Revelation we hear of the beast opposed to God.

Well, in verse 17 we hear that unless a person has a mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name, they cannot buy or sell.

Now look at Revelation 14:9-11.

This time we hear about marks of the beast on the forehead or hand.

It then links it with worship of the beast.

So, bearing the mark of the beast on the forehead or the hand identifies you as a worshipper or someone identified with the beast.

You belong to him and can access the benefits of that.

Well, I think that the seal spoken about in Revelation 7 is similar.

Go back to Revelation 7, verse 3.

Again, there is something on the forehead.

This time it is a seal.

This seal is very different from the mark of the beast.

This seal marks a person as a genuine member in the community of God's redeemed people.

Without it, entry into the eternal city of God is impossible.

So, the seal is a sign of ownership.

They are the servants or slaves of God, just as verse 3 indicates.

They are under his power and protection.

Now look at verse 4.

We hear that the number of those are sealed were 144,000.

Now, here I need to pause and let you know what I think that this figure means.

First, there is maths of it.

It is 12 squared.

I myself wonder if the two twelves represent both Israel and Gentile converts to Christ.

Then it is 12 squared by 10 cubed.

In other words, it is Israelite and gentile converts rounded out.

In other words, all Christians from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds.

I think that I could argue this from the numbers and from the rather strange list of tribes.

Anyway, I need to do some work on this.

However, I think that it is supported by the other reference to the 144,000.

Please turn to Revelation 14.

Look at verses 1-3.

They are sealed with the name of the Lamb and the Father (verse 1).

Now look at the last half of verse 3.

They are those who have been redeemed from the earth.

And note the last half sentence.

There are none others.

No one other than them was able to learn the song.

This is a picture of all converts to Christ.

This is the new Israel of God.

Foci 2: The Multitude/Crowd

Okay, so there is the first foci, the sealed ones.

They are the servants or slaves of God.

So then, who are the multitude or crowd mentioned in verse 9?

This is a strong contrast with the 144,000, isn't it?

Unlike the 144,000 they cannot be counted.

Unlike the 144,000 they are from every nation.

Unlike the 144,000 then are not in imminent danger but are victorious and secure.

In my view, what is happening is determined by location.

Where is the location of the 144,000?

Take a look at chapter 7, verses 1-4.

They are on earth, caught up in a very real conflict, about to enter a time of earthly opposition.

Now look at the location of the great crowd.

Flip down to verse 9.

They are not entering a period of opposition on earth.

No.

They are standing before the throne of God and the Lamb.

They are wearing the white robes of victory.

The second view is a view into heaven.

A heavenly glimpse of the same people from a different perspective.

Look at verse 13 and 14.

One of the elders asks about the ones in white robes.

Then he answers his own question in verse 14.

They are those who have come out of the great tribulation.

They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

They are now before God in his presence.

Friends, please grasp this.

There is only one way to be part of this great throng, this enormous crowd, this great and joyous gathering.

And it is this.

It is to have your robes made white in the blood of the Lamb.

The victory is from first to last due to him.

Friends, we are saved in one way and one way alone.

Through the atoning work of Christ for us on the cross.

Seal 7

Friends, we have one more verse before we tie things together.

You see, there is one more seal to be broken.

So, look at

The Great Truths of Revelation 6:1–8:1

Friends, can you hear the great truths of this passage?

I began with the picture of the mess our world finds itself in.

We have progressed through the breaking of the six seals.

And where have we found ourselves.

Well, we have found ourselves travelling through eternal realities.

This is what will take place, no, must take place in the fallen world.

The world will experience all the general tribulations that lie outside the garden of Eden.

That is the world we will find on our doorstep and in our midst and on our television screens.

However, that world is also the battleground between the progeny of the woman and the serpent.

Between the seed who is Jesus and the ancient serpent, who is the devil.

And we, the people of God will be caught up in this.

In fact, we will be in the crosshairs of this struggle.

In the midst of it.

However, a day of judgment will come.

We are told that in Revelation 6:15.

And in that day, all the redeemed will be rescued.

They will enter the fullness of salvation.

However, the message of 8:1 is that although we know the background, the shape, and the end, there is more to be known.

The seventh seal is yet to be read.

So, come back on Sunday as we advance through this spectacular book.

However, what I want to leave you with is that magnificent picture of verses 15-17 at the end of chapter 7.

Friends, this is the destiny of those sealed for the Lamb.

This is the destiny of the slaves of God.

¹⁵Therefore,

*“they are before the throne of God
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne
will shelter them with his presence.*

*¹⁶‘Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.*

*The sun will not beat down on them,
nor any scorching heat.*

*¹⁷For 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.'"

[Revelation 7:15-17; NIV]