

## ***Revelation Seals: 6, 8:1-5***

Let's begin with prayer!

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Introduction:***

So, all.

Today's an important day in our walk through Revelation, because I'm going to share with us an idea that I have shared before, but I'm sure we've forgotten if we ever heard it. It will be a new idea to many of us.

I want to share with us a way to understand how the scenes read to us today fit into Revelation as a whole.

We'll talk about suffering and these seven seals; about how they might be relevant for us. But I really want to communicate how important they are for understanding Revelation's structure, how Revelation works as a single letter. So we'll try to navigate that whole balance between information and transformation in this message, today.

### ***Locating Ourselves:***

Last week we talked about chapters 4 and 5, which introduced the slaughtered Lamb, Jesus, as the mighty Lion of Judah. It was a throne room scene, and it functioned to center us so that as we move forward in this book, we are reminded that God is at the center of the universe, is with the Lamb, and the only place we can direct our worship.

Today we'll talk about the scroll with the seven seals that we

saw the Lamb take last week, and we'll discuss what's going on here. And these seals, they raise critical questions for us, questions that have to be answered. Those questions aren't "what do these seals stand for?" They're something else. Let's talk about them.

### ***Critical Questions To Answer:***

Hold in your mind for a second three things: Seals, Trumpets, & Bowls. Okay? Seals, Trumpets, & Bowls. Seals, Trumpets, & Bowls. Oh my!

Since the the 200s--remember them?--people have looked at Revelation and noticed some things. They've noticed these "Seal Judgments," we'll call them, in chapter six through the start of chapter eight. Seven of them; and these seem really, like the end of the world, you know?

But they're not...because what we'll call "Trumpet Judgments" What we'll call Trumpet Judgments take place. In fact, it's a little like the seventh seal judgment is actually this next set of "Trumpet judgments." But there are seven of these "Trumpet Judgments." They're in chapters 8 through 11. They feel like the end of the world!

But after we read some crazy stuff, we see the world sort of end again, in a final set of seven judgments we'll call "Bowl Judgments," which happen in Chapter 16.

Chapters 17 through 20 are all about the "Fall of Babylon," which is the Roman Empire, and then Chapter 20 seems like, finally, finally, the world seems to end. There's no more set of seven judgments.

So very quickly after Revelation was penned, people noticed this stuff. We haven't, for some reason. But the early Church did. They looked at these three sets of seven judgments--"Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls, oh my!"--and they've said, "How can these judgments, which seem so universal and final in scope--each time they're declared the world seems to end--how can there be three sets of them?" Who is left alive by the time the "Bowl Judgments" roll around, you know?

Either, the world is on the receiving end of near-final judgment multiple times, or something else is going on.

### ***Foundations: Recapitulation***

Here's the "something else" that's going on. And again: This is not a new idea, even if it's a new idea to us.

Have you ever heard the word "Recapitulation?" Recapitulation. As a rhetorical device, as a rhetorical device, recapitulation is when you summarize and restate the main points of something. You summarize and restate something, and usually, you do it so that you can expand on the thing you're summarizing or reinforce some point about the thing you're summarizing. Recapitulation is when you summarize and restate the main points of something, so that you can reinforce what it is you're summarizing, and give it more impact. Recapitulation is when you summarize and restate the main points of something, so that you can reinforce what it is you're summarizing, and really get your point across, in a memorable way. Recapitulation is..jk. I was recapitulating? Did you get it?

People have long thought that what is going on in Revelation

is not three universal, final, astonishing judgment scenes, but one scene of judgment, recapitulated, three different times.

So as we leave the letters of chapters 2 and 3 behind, and move through Revelation, we're not seeing a string of three different events, each of which with seven judgments, in which the world practically ends. What we're really seeing is one scene of judgment, repeated multiple times, presented with different imagery, language, and emphases.

Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls: It's the same scene of perfect judgment. It's viewed three different times, recapitulated.

The judgment that we see through the Seals, through the Trumpets, through the Bowls that are poured out on the world--it's the same judgment, we're just looking at it out a different room in the house. We're looking at it through a different pair of glasses. Each time John presents us with this scene, we're given a different angle, a different point of view on what's going on. He's recapitulating.

Think about how simple this makes Revelation, really: It's a long letter to seven churches which promises that judgment will come on Rome, and does so through three different scenes. We get lost in the weeds, because they're "wild and crazy weeds."

We can talk about the persuasive emphasis that each scene carries, and we should.

For example, the tone of the Seal Judgments, while not happy, is nothing compared to the tone of Bowl Judgments.

And what we'd say is that as we move through the narrative, the story of Revelation, we're supposed to see that each of these Judgments raises the pressure on us as readers of this work. Rhetorically, as we--the churches who receive this letter--as we read, each time these seven judgments are presented we're asked with increasing pressure: Will you be faithful? Will you be faithful? Will you be faithful?

And the Seal Judgments have, at their core, a desire to persuade people to Repentance. They are mild in comparison to what we see. As we move on, we'll see the Trumpet Judgments get harsher, starker--although there's still room for Repentance. But the Bowl Judgments: if we're not persuaded by then, we're in rough shape, because they're simply terrible. There is no room for repentance.

So this same scene of Judgment is recapitulated, replayed and reviewed, with increasing pressure that is meant to persuade us more and more as we read this letter that John's given us, so that by the time we read the Bowl Judgments, we're like: I will exit Rome, stop Emperor worship, and live for this Lamb who is worthy only, no matter what it costs.

Look. I really think this is what's happening in Revelation. The letter is telling us what's really going on in the heavens, and it's telling us about the perfect judgment that's coming on Rome, and it's doing it in ways that increasingly demand either a faithful response or some sort of weird, welcome of the judgment we've been warned about.

### ***Foundations: Suffering***

We should talk about suffering. We haven't yet.

Revelation is doing a tricky thing when it comes to suffering. There are Christians suffering in these churches, and in the Roman Empire. We know it. But it's not nearly as expansive as these visions suggest. It just wasn't. What we have to realize is that Revelation is calling its readers to behavior in ways that are only going to result in more persecution, more suffering. Do we see this?

I mean, if we in Laodicea take seriously all the stuff we're reading, and for us John's message just pops off the page that Rome is evil and we shouldn't be taking part in civic life, because it is as religious as it is anything else, then life is going to be harder for us.

If we begin to internalize the language of Revelation, and start telling our local officials, who were priests in the Imperial Cult, that we can't come to the great big fundraiser, because it's demonic, we're going to lose friends. If lines are beginning to be drawn between us and our extended family, who are Jewish, and they are questioning our orthodoxy, it's going to be difficult. If we're Antipas' family, who was killed for his faith, and we decide to make signs and picket Rome because they killed him like Rome killed Jesus, what's going to happen to us?

Revelation is calling its readers to act in ways that will result in ever-greater persecution. We might know we'll triumph, we might remember that the Lamb is victorious, and we're on His side, and we might own all those promises of good things in the Letters we read: but still, suffering hurts.

And we're going to experience more of it.

## ***How Long?***

And our question is going to be, as we experiences this persecution and these troubles: God, when are you going to act? How much of this do we and will we Christians have to endure?

This is a valid question, right? Here's our answer:

**“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 and brothers and sisters were killed just as they had been. (Rev 6:9-11 tniv)**

This isn't the most satisfying answer, of course: To the question of how much, and how long, we're told, “a little while longer” and “until the full number are killed.”

One author talks about the way this points to the tension that is in Revelation: Jesus is on his way, right? He's the one who is coming: but we're not quite sure when he'll arrive. And he doesn't seem to be moving any more quickly. Let me quote, here: “If God is the righteous God he must soon put all wrongs to right. But the logic of delay is that of God's patience and grace. He gives people time to repent.” (Bauckham, 156).

Here's the pay-off of this: for there to be witnesses, overcomers, God has to be patient. People have to have time to repent and to come out of Babylon and join the Lamb's side. But, that means that those who undergo persecution now, who have suffered through faithfully, are kept waiting.

The church has never gotten away from this tension, has it? We want God to come, now, and set things right? And we ask God "How long?" But what we're thankful for is God's very patience and grace that brought us here.

"The church which prays for the coming of the kingdom and hopes for the conversion of the nations lives in the tension of [Jesus' immediate arrival] and [Jesus'] delay." (Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 156ff.) That's another quote. We want God to set things right; but we also want our neighbors saved, and we ourselves are glad that Jesus didn't come right before we started following him, right?

"Soon," isn't the most satisfying answer. But those who are asking get robes in the meantime. They get a sign of God's promise to triumph. Suffering here is a result of being stuck in an evil, sinful world; and the continued on-going persecution is a side effect of God's desire to see all people repent and turn to him; and those of us who do, who maintain our faith as overcomers: we're going to be rewarded and encouraged for it.

God's promise in Habbakuk, "Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay" (2:30) is a promise that fits our situation today, John's situation then, and Habbakuk's own.

The call to us as readers is to continue to pray that Jesus wouldn't delay, and at the same time continue to pray that God would gather in all tongues, and tribes, and nations, and peoples.

But in the midst of our terrible suffering, wherever it is we find ourselves, we're supposed to cling tightly to the robes we've been given and remember that we don't wait in vain: Jesus is coming. The slaughtered Lamb is on His way and will Roar as the Lion of Judah.

### ***Riders: Old Testament Sources***

So. The scroll is taken by the Lamb, and the Lamb begins to open seals that are on it. The first four seals are Riders on horses: A white horse, then a red horse, then a black and finally a pale green horse. Each of these riders have special tools: a bow and a sword, and scales and finally Death itself acting out of its own power.

These riders themselves are probably a combination of images from Zechariah 6, which describes God sending out into the world four chariots, which are called "winds," that are led by colored horses--there, red, black, white, and a word that might mean gray. There's also mention in Ezekiel 14 of God's "four deadly acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild animals, and pestilence." In Jeremiah 15 we see a similar set of judgments that will happen against people who reject God: "Those destined for pestilence, to pestilence, and those destined for sword, to the sword; those destined for famine, to famine, and those destined for captivity, to captivity." And immediately following this, God goes on to say "And I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers,"

which are the sword, dogs, birds, and wild animals.

So there's precedent in what's revealed to John, here, right? If he's steeped himself in biblical imagery, he's getting a vision that connects to what he's used to reading about. Nothing John sees here is duplicated from Old Testament stuff, but it echoes what we can read there. Because, again, John is using language his audience would immediately, immediately connect with. The fact that we don't says more about our lack of biblical literacy than it does anything else. We read this vision of John, and it is immediately legitimized for us.

### ***Riders: Meanings***

So these four riders are released, and a couple of authors have looked at the way the white horse rider, as a mounted archer, brings to mind the archers of the Parthians, Rome's enemy to the East, and the way this rider might symbolize war, but war with outsiders, national conflict.

This second rider, on its red horse with its sword, may be pointing to internal strife, domestic, civil war sort of conflict; they come to this conclusion through the "one another" language, which is insider language, about "us" not "them."

This third black horse with its scales-holding rider brings crazy high food prices: 8 times wheat's normal amount, for example. (Brook & Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*, 141ff.)

And we can see in passages in Jeremiah and Hosea that "grain, wine, and oil" are shorthand for God's providence. The fact that these stay protected as the riders go forth is a

reminder to God's People that this isn't total devastation. There's time to repent as we read. Remember, Seals aren't as bad as Trumpets which aren't as bad as Bowls. John wants us, early in Revelation, to say, "Yeah, I'm on God's side. Forget the emperor."

And finally, Death comes, with "sword, famine, pestilence, and wild animals." This four-some appears in Jeremiah 16, and other places, and is always a sign of God's judgment on unfaithful people. People who have chosen to reject God's calling.

The fifth seal opens to the question of suffering, the "How long, O Lord?" question. And the tension that we talked about is here in full force. But if those who die at Death & Hades' hands are the unfaithful ones, these are their opposites: these are faithful ones, who died at the hand of the unfaithful. (ibid, 142.)

And the sixth seal opens after this, which releases, in the words of the authors I quoted before "a series of cosmic signs that threaten to turn the created order back into primeval chaos." And heaven rolls up, and reveals to the whole world the Lamb who is a Lion and the one on the Throne, and everyone everywhere would rather die than face them and be on the receiving end of the judgment that their choices against God, and actions against God's people, have piled up for them. I love how one author I was reading talks about the terror that "wrath of the Lamb" conjures up; because lambs aren't terrifying, right? But when they are, it's doubly scary. Like that time my sweet, dear grandmother swore at me. (Keener, 222).

And bam! Chapter Seven happens. There is a pause in the world. Angels stop the wind. All is calm.

A perfect number, 144,000 people are marked for God with a seal on their foreheads, which we could talk about in depth, and get all bogged down in, but at the end of the day, is a mark of ownership that God gives them, which has precedent in the Old Testament, where even the high priest had a mark “like a seal” on his forehead—and God’s People, of course are a kingdom of priests. (cf. Keener, 234). They are promised that they in their faithfulness will be protected. But: this doesn’t necessarily mean that these people will avoid suffering or persecution or anything like that, right? We should take this to mean that these 144,000--which if you remember from last week, is just a number full of perfection, completeness, “just rightness”--these people are God’s people, and they are not part of that 1/4 of the earth, that unfaithful group, that are on the receiving end of Death and Hades’ judgment.

A scene of massive worship happens, which we won’t talk about much: but John sees another huge multitude, a mass of all different people, praising God and the Lamb: and we’re told that these people are ones who’ve remained faithful through a final judgment on Rome and those who have sided with it. But we won’t see that final judgment for chapters and chapters and chapters...which again, is *weird*. But it’s not weird at all if we keep in mind this recapitulation idea.

Because the judgment scenes we see aren’t on a timeline, one happening right after the other: they are three perspectives on the judgment that’s coming on Rome and its people, visions that are meant to communicate particular

things, and since its one set of judgments viewed three times it would make sense to have this first viewing followed by something that doesn't seem to happen until near the end of the book.

But the final seal is opened in chapter 8. And, we read, "there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." I think this was so John could catch his breath, really.

All is still. And seven trumpets are handed out to seven angels; we'll talk about them next week, I think. And while things are calm, and still: no wind, right? and no noise, an angel with a bowl of incense incense walks to the alter we just saw, under which all those who have died at the hands of unfaithful people cry out. Their cries for God to act rise like incense prayers up to God.

### ***Bridging the Gap: Your Dad will be home soon.***

Look, when I was young I didn't listen very well. I was a punk and a scoundrel, mean, and a bad brother to my siblings. And my mom would often say to me, "Your dad will be home soon." The promise being that when he arrives, I am getting mine.

But there was still time, right? He wasn't home yet. And part of my mom's parental rhetoric was the thin hope--I don't know how she held onto this for so long really--that I would somehow be kind, and loving, and "listen"--which is a gentler way to say "obey."

And I knew two things: I was going to be punished and there was still time to escape punishment. Unfortunately, usually, I kept on keeping on, you know, "digging myself a hole," to

borrow a phrase from good ol' ma.

We daily thank God that Bo is like Carolyn.

But remember that we are going to see this scene again; wildly different, but reframed. This first time, with the Seal Judgments, invites repentance in ways John's audience would have understood. Again: This first time, with the Seal Judgments, invites repentance in ways John's audience would have understood.

It's a lot like my mom, saying "Dad will be home soon." This will take place soon; what are you going to do? Jesus is the one who is coming; make a choice. The judgments, though harsh, are not total; and in fact, a couple of them are nothing but the prayers of those who are being persecuted.

And every one of these Christians who comes "out of Babylon," who rejects Rome, are going to have the opportunity--whether they look forward to it or not--to let someone know why they are pulling out of this evil empire. This message is going to spread.

And, too, when my siblings saw me getting threatened for my bad behavior, my brother and sister would begin to point out how good they were acting. They'd do their chores, be extra helpful, just to point out how worthy I was of punishment, right? This is what a loving, normal family does, isn't it?

Anyway, They saw what I was facing, and their good behavior was reinforced.

These Seal Judgments are meant to affect John's readers in the same way as "Your dad will be home soon" was meant to affect me.

### ***Conclusions:***

So.

Are you the one who needs to hear that Jesus is coming, because the pace of your journey toward the Lord has slowed so much that you are far behind where you should be. You have stalled, or worse: are walking backwards, rejecting things that really you know you should not be rejecting. If this is the case, do you need to repent, turn back to the Lord, so that when the Lamb who is coming soon shows up, you don't try to hide under an avalanche?

There may be some of us, or some that we know, who are on the outside, too. Who have not yet really committed ourselves to this Lamb, and can't even say we've stalled in our journey, because really, we've been or they've never started walking with or toward the Lord. And if we fall into this camp, what do we think about a call to repentance? And for those we love who fall in this camp, how can we communicate the need for urgent action through the medium of patient love?

And there may be some of us who really, are right there around the Lamb, singing our heads off. To the best of our knowledge, we are right with the Lord, and we are striving to stay there. I am sure some of us are in that place; are overcoming, and need to simply continue on. But, if any of us does think we fall in this camp, be careful. We should always, maybe, be checking ourselves.

There is still sin. Our world is broken. And there is evil--personal and systemic--that we must stand against because it stands against the victory-through-weakness of the Lamb. As we live, we wait and wait for the Lord to come. I hope that we have all had moments where we ask "How long?" because any longer seems unbearable. It means that we're really living. But we also know people who are this close, who are so close to realizing the Lamb and the throne are at the center of the universe, and so close to acknowledging the real center of all creation.

God is a patient God; and his patience isn't for us right now; but it has been for us, because without it none of us would be in this digital space, looking forward to robes and crowns. God's patience is for those strangers who we could care less about, but who will become family members we can love, in time.

In the meantime our prayers go up as incense, in this space between the declaration that Jesus is coming and the fact that he's not yet showed up. As we move forward from Seals, to Trumpets, to Bowls, the pressure on us--and John's first audience--to see clearly and choose for the Lord is only going to grow.

**Extras: Foundations: Native Vision Language:**

And let's be honest here: In Revelation, John is describing to us visions that he has had. As we talk about these visions, we'll always be talking about the way they echo or allude to Old Testament things.

But these are real visions, aren't they? I mean, this isn't just a work of fine apocalyptic literature; it's also a record of what John has experienced, has seen.

But here's a principle that I think is true, seems true: God is not going to speak to his people, give them visions, that they simply cannot understand at all. What would be the point, right? God speaks to his people in ways they understand, and assumedly, the visions God would give his people follow the same principle.

If we were to have visions of angels, we'd probably see a huge person with big white wings, right? This is what an angel looks like. They're probably shiny. And if God was going to send us a vision of angelic beings, wanted us to know that we're seeing angelic beings, we would probably be able to recognize the beings we see as angelic. We are influenced by this shared cultural thing we've got going on about what an angel looks like.

John was influenced by something else. He was influenced by the world of the Old Testament. He was influenced by apocalyptic literature. When he saw angelic beings, they didn't look like what we'd draw, you know: they looked like what he knew an angelic being looked like, because he was shaped by apocalyptic literature.

Here's my point: we can talk about the Old Testament influence on Revelation, because, frankly, the Old Testament influenced John. God gave him visions that he understood--even if we think they're crazy and weird. And as he crafted this work based on the visions he had, which he understood, I'm sure that he also made reference to the texts that had influenced him so much--and on purpose, because of course, he wanted his readers to know what he knew because of the visions God had given him.

God speaks to us in our native language, even when it comes to visions. And John's native language was Bible.