

Study #2 in preparation for:
March 14

Revelation 6:1-7:17

The Wrath of the Lamb

“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 wrath has come, and who can stand?’”

Revelation 6:16-17

Perspective: Two irrepressible themes resound through the Book of Revelation: Worship and Judgment, Rejoicing and Reckoning, Deliverance and Depravity, Salvation and Condemnation. It is difficult at times to keep up with the spiraling intensity of God's judgment. We want to read the book of Revelation like we recite the alphabet, one letter at a time, but no one can use the alphabetical sequence to write anything. In order to form words and sentences we use many letters, out of order and repeated, until we create an intelligible word picture. The book of Revelation was not meant to be broken down into a linear time line with each detail anchored in some literal piece of speculation, until the jig-saw puzzle is completed. It is not a code to be cracked but a true story to be told. There are patterns and rhythms within this Spirit-inspired book that need to be followed and felt in order for the meaning to take shape within us. There is nothing new in this book that has not been said before in God's Word; nothing of critical importance in the book that is not repeated over and over again.

All attention is focused on the Lamb, who opens the seven seals one at a time. As each seal is broken our understanding of reality is shaped. As we prepare for the future our insight into the present deepens. We are faced now with the inevitable consequences of human sinfulness, each one a vision of what is transpiring on earth and also in heaven. In chapter six the mature follower of Jesus learns three things about facing reality: (1) Evil must be understood and overcome. This is the message that corresponds to the first four seals and the four horses of the apocalypse. (2) The fifth seal reveals the need for patience and perseverance as the saints who have gone before wait for God's timing. (3) The sixth seal reveals that most people look for security everywhere but in God.

If you take the book of Revelation out of the twilight zone some pretty amazing things happen. It is no longer seen as complicated religious calculus, but as the compelling call to the patient endurance and faithfulness that God intended. St. John announces no new truth. The truth is still the same: God in Christ is reconciling the world to himself. Salvation is by grace through faith and the atoning sacrifice of the Cross of Christ is central to our faith. Evil charges forth, but evil is not the supreme reality. Heaven and Hell are real. Salvation and Judgment are coming. Jesus is Lord.

Let's do the Numbers: John uses numbers as language: 7-churches, spirits, lampstands, stars, seals, trumpets, thunders, bowls. The Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes. Like the seven days of Creation, the number 7 symbolizes the essence, the completeness, the comprehending reality of what is signified. The number of the anti-christ, 666 (13:18) is the number which falls short of perfection in each of its digits ("failure upon failure upon failure" Hendriksen). "This evil trinity 666 apes the Holy Trinity 777, but always falls short and fails" (Torrance).

Twenty-four Elders doubles the number 12, a popular number for God's designated and delegated governing body. In this case that sense of completeness represented by the governing 12 is doubled. The number four speaks of completeness: four living creatures, four apocalyptic horses (the last rider Death is given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague), four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth. The number 4 appears to refer to the four points of the compass. All of nature and creation is comprehended within these dimensions. The righteous, victorious multitude of 144,000 carries the theme of completeness to a new level. Twelve (the number of the tribes of Israel) is both squared and multiplied by a thousand—a twofold way of emphasizing completeness (Mounce). It signifies the last generation of believers who resist the power of Satan and refuse the mark of the beast (see 20:4).

A limited period of time in which the influence of a defeated Satan intensifies right before the end, is represented by forty-two months; 1,260 days; a time, times and half a time (11:2-3; 12:6,14; 13:5; see 20:3, 7-9). The occurrence of the number, 1,000 years, holds no previous statistical or symbolic value except for the following references: "For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night" (Ps.90:4). "...even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place?" (Ec.6:6). "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (2 Peter 3:8). The number 1,000 was not intended to be taken literally. It was meant to signify the perfection of God's mercy and the extended opportunity people have had to respond to the Gospel.

Outline: It is important to have an overview of what is coming in the apostle John's revelation of Jesus Christ. Opening the 6 seals reveals the four horses of the apocalypse, the cry of the saints, total judgment and inexplicable human resistance (6:1-15). This is followed by an interlude which involves the sealing of the 144,000 and the great multitude in white robes worshipping the Lamb (7:1-17). The 7th seal allows for a dramatic pause for the prayers of the saints, followed by 6 trumpets announcing a series of judgments (8:5-9:21). The sequence indicates God's active involvement in bringing punishment upon a wicked world. (6:15-17 parallels 9:20-21). This is followed by another interlude, which describes the message of the little scroll ("There will be no more delay!") and the powerful testimony of the two witnesses (10:1-11:14). The 7th trumpet is a climactic reminder that God will graciously carry out his covenant promises (11:15-19).

Prior to pouring out the 7 Bowls, the conflict between the Church, the Bride of Christ, and the powers of evil is vividly described (12:1-14:5). This is followed by a reminder of the faithfulness of the 144,000 (14:1-5). The awful extent of evil and depravity is summarized in the description of an evil trinity made up of the dragon, the beast of the sea, and beast of the earth (12:13-18). Three angels make a final appeal and announce the final judgment, which is pictured as a great harvest of human carnage (14:6-20). Then seven angels with the seven last plagues pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath (15:1-16:21). Divine retribution is revealed by the seals, announced by the trumpets and fully executed by the bowls, but people continue to curse God.

Questions:

1. What relationship do these symbolic horses have to God's wrath?

The apostle John witnesses the four-fold devastating impact of evil (6:1-8). Evil charges into our lives leaving destruction and death. The four horses of the apocalypse symbolize the stampede of evil thundering across the landscape pounding out pain and creating havoc. First is the white horse, ridden by a warrior with a bow, wearing a victory crown and bent on conquest. The first horse and rider symbolize political control and military might. The second horse is red, symbolizing slaughter and bloodshed. Its rider brandishes a large sword, wielding the power of revolution, anarchy, gang violence, and criminal activity. Evil is complex, with countervailing forces: totalitarianism and anarchy, fascists and vigilantes. The third horse is black and its rider holds a scale. Taken together they symbolize scarcity and famine. The fourth and final apocalyptic horse gallops forward when the fourth seal is broken. It is sickly pale, the ashen color of a corpse, and its rider is Death. Death and destruction are left in its path due to violence, starvation, disease and wild beasts (see Ezekiel 14:21).

2. What relationship do these apocalyptic horses of conquest, revolution, famine and disease have to do with our prayer life (6:9-11)? Are war and famine and sickness the ultimate realities facing humanity?

3. Do you agree or disagree that of all people Christians should not be surprised by evil? It is sobering to realize that time is not measured in conversions but in martyrdoms (6:11).

4. How hard is it to live in the in-between-time? Reflect on the relationship between Colossians 2:15 and Hebrews 2:8-9.

5. Who are these servants of God, these 144,000, from all the tribes of Israel?

This symbolic number, 12 squared then multiplied by 1000, signifies the last generation of believers, including Jews and Gentiles, who are preserved and protected at the end of the age. Not a single soul is lost. Everyone is protected. Some commentators believe that the 144,000 refer exclusively to ethnic Jews because of the reference to the twelve tribes of Israel. It is important to note that John has already applied the Old Testament promises made to Israel to the church (2:26-27; 3:12) and in writing to Gentile believers he has included them in his definition of what it means to be a true Jew (2:9; 3:9). The Church is the community of the New Jerusalem (21:9-13) and the destiny of the people of God is not divided between Jews and Gentiles. As Paul said so clearly: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal.3:28-29; see Mt.19:28; Phil.3:3).

6. How do the two groups described in chapter seven compare?

Chapter 7 is divided into two parts, like two stanzas of the same hymn. Both stanzas picture the people of God: the first stanza describes the last generation of believers, who are experiencing the final collapse of civilization. They are signed, sealed and delivered. Their salvation is assured. The second stanza illustrates the great multitude who have come out of the great tribulation. They are the success of the great commission. Their white robes signify the purity of the righteousness of Christ. Their palm branches symbolize their celebration and adoration of God. Their loud voices declare the truth without doubt, debate or equivocation: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." And their affirmation harmonizes with the great choir in heaven, who declare boldly, "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

8. Those who have come out of the great tribulation have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (7:14) and the Lamb has become their Shepherd (7:17). How do you explain these two paradoxes?

9. How does chapter 7 answer the question found at the end of chapter 6, "For the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?" (6:17). Will you be able to stand until the end?