

REVELATION

AN INTENSIVE STUDY

1

The Lion and the Lamb 5: “Who is Able to Stand?”

Seals 1-4 mirror Jesus teaching in Matthew 24, where He tells of the Gospel going into all the world (see Rev 6:1-2), a world filled with the spirit of violence and strife among men (6:3-4), famine and unjust oppression (6:5-6), and all the cruel workings of death (6:7-8). These all continually exist in the world into which the church is called to make its proclamation. These afflictions *have occurred throughout history*. They are the “*birthpangs*” of the coming age.

Remember: the structural similarity between the seals, trumpets, bowls.

The **pattern** can be summarized as:

- **1-2-3-4** (rapid and related)
- **5** (more detail, tells us **what group in focus**)
- **6** (final intensification of evil)
- **Interlude** (**what is happening to the Church?**)
- **7** (always pictures the End: **final judgment**).

The **fifth part** of each series is the interpretive key for **what group is in focus**:

- 7 Seals (**5th Seal = 6:9-11**): The saints calling for justice
- 7 Trumpets (**5th Trumpet = 9:1-6**) Those without the seal of God
- 7 Last Plagues (**5th Plague = 16:10-11**) The Kingdom and throne of the Beast

Revelation 6:9-11

When the **Lamb** 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 REST a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

The idea of “souls” (*psuchas*) of martyred saints under the altar comes from Leviticus 17:11, where the sacrificial blood (symbolic of life, *psuche*) is poured at the base of the altar of burnt offering (Lev 4:7). The Christian martyr as a sacrifice offered to and accepted by God (cf. Phil 2:17; 2 Tim 4:6).¹

¹ Thomas, “Imprecatory Prayers,” p. 124; cf. Klassen, pp. 300-11. Says Ladd: “The fact that John saw the souls of the **martyrs under the altar has nothing to do with the state of the dead or their situation in the intermediate state**; it is merely a vivid way of picturing the fact that they had been martyred in the name of their God... the state of final and perfected blessedness awaits the return of Christ” (Ladd, *Commentary*, pp. 103, 106).

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The saints' cry also echoes Genesis 4, where the spilled blood of Abel (the true worshiper of the Lamb) cried to God for justice against a brother who *worshiped the works of his own hands* (Gen 4:2-10; cf. Rev 9:20-21).

There is no immorality in their plea, for it is not the saints themselves but their unjust death which cries for retribution. They have been slaughtered because of their testimony for Jesus and in killing them the world has defied/denied God!

In **the Psalms**, the cry "**How long, O Lord?**" is the *cry of the persecuted for justice* (Ps 74:10; 79:5; cf. Zechariah 1:12). It is the *cry of those who* ask that He will soon vindicate His righteousness on earth (Ps 7:8; 26:1; 35:24; 43:1)²

The saints' prayers for justice are the catalyst which moves God to act.³

The fifth seal calls for judgment upon "*those who dwell on earth.*"

That judgment arrives in the sixth seal. (6:12ff; 8:3ff).

In a very real sense **all** true Christians are seen as "**martyrs**". NOT all will die, but all are ready to love Him more than life if required to (12:11).⁴

It is the world's antagonism to this devoted witness which brings judgment:

Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets! **God has judged her [Babylon] for the way she treated you.** (18:20)

I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the **blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.** (Rev 17:6)

The white robes are "**given.**" We do not justify ourselves; *God justifies us* (19:8).

The saints are told to "**REST**" in death until the full number of their fellow servants is killed.

² Trites, *New Testament Concept*, p. 162. Caird agreed: "The point at issue here is not the personal relations of the martyrs with their persecutors, but the validity of their faith. **They have gone to their death in the confidence that God's word, attested in the life and death of Jesus, is the ultimate truth**; but unless in the end tyranny and other forms of wickedness meet with retribution, that faith is an illusion" (Caird, *Revelation of St. John*, p. 85).

³ Rev 6:9-11; 8:3-4; cf. 9:13; 10:6-7; 14:18; 16:7; 19:1-2. Thomas, "Imprecatory Prayers," pp. 125-28.

⁴ "Both 'bear witness' and 'testimony' reflect the same Greek root, martyr.... to be a martyr [is] not necessarily to be killed, but to make a witness that risks it" (Eller, *Most Revealing Book*, p. 43). There is a very real sense in which the New Testament concept of martyr was anyone who maintained his testimony for Jesus to the end of life. For a detailed study of the etymology of martyr, see Trites, "Martus and Martyrdom," pp. 72-80: "The very nature of the church is to be a martyr people." Jesus called each person who followed Him to bear a cross (Matt 10:38; 16:34). He was not referring to heavy burdens, but to a willingness to die for one's faith: "The cross is nothing else than an instrument of death. Every disciple of Jesus is in essence a martyr; and John has in view all believers" (Ladd, *Commentary*, p. 104).

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This **parallels Rev 14:15-20** where Christ comes returns after both good and evil have so matured that they bear fruit on a worldwide scale (**Matthew 24:12-14**).

The **martyrs' cry** in the 5th seal evokes “*the wrath of the Lamb*” in the 6th seal.

Revelation 6:12-14

I watched as **the Lamb** 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** removed from its place. As did Old Testament apocalyptic prophets, John uses “**earthquake**” as the symbol for the final outpouring of judgment upon evil as **God comes** (cf. 11:19; 16:18; Isaiah 2:21; 13:13; Ezekiel 38: 19-20; Nahum 1:5-6; Joel 2:10-11; etc.). **But this theophany is clearly a Christophany.**

The **other six cosmic calamities** at the opening of the 6th seal can also be traced back to Old Testament judgment-theophanies and to Jesus' description of events that accompany His appearing in **Mark 13:24-26** and **Matt 24:29-30**.⁵

Revelation 6:15-17

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 [or His] wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”**

This sevenfold classification of mankind in 6:15 has despised the **Lamb's grace** and now He appears as “**the Lion of Judah**” (5:5). They call for the rocks and mountains to hide them (**Isaiah 2:19** and **Hosea 10:8**). For those who despised His grace, God's wrath as a grim reality.

Their destruction is ever **God 's strange act**, described as “**the wrath of the Lamb!**”⁶ The same *self-sacrificial Christ* who is *loving Savior, gentle Shepherd, eternal Sustainer* in **Rev 7:14-17** is seen in **6:14-17** as terrifying Executioner by all who have spurned His gracious work for them.

This judgment imagery is **not to terrify God's people but assure us** that God will bring an end to evil and **right every wrong in final judgment**. Throughout Scripture, the Day of *vengeance*

⁵ The darkening of the sun and moon (Mark 13:24; cf. Isa 13:10; Ezek 32:7; Joel 2:31); the falling of the stars (Mark 13:25; cf. Isa 34:4; Ps 102:25-26); the moving of the mountains and islands (Ezek 38:20; Nah 1:5; Jer 4:24).

⁶ “Whoever heard of a lamb being angry? It is a terrible thought--the gentlest of all God's creatures angry. This is the wrath of love, the wrath of sacrificial love, which, having done the absolute utmost for us and our salvation, tells us as nothing else could the certainty with which evil awaits its doom at the hand of God” (Morris, *Revelation of St. John*, p. 111).

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on evil is also pictured as the Day of *God's redemption* for the humble (Isaiah 59:15-20; 61:1-2; 63:1-6; Rom 2:5; cf. Eph 4:30).

Therefore John does not go directly to the 7th Seal, but presents **an interlude**.

This interlude is his response to the question of the wicked at Christ's appearing: "*The great day of their wrath has come— and who is able to stand?*" (6:17).

Revelation 7:1-2

After this I saw **four angels** standing at the **four corners** of the earth, holding back the **four winds** of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the **seal of the living God**. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea:

Revelation 7:3-4

"Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees *until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.*" Then **I HEARD the number** of those who were sealed: **144,000** from all the tribes of Israel.

"**Winds**" are a *symbol of judgment* (Jeremiah 23:19-20; 30:23-24) and "**four**" indicates *worldwide destruction*. There is **no place** to which the ungodly can escape where the *wrath of God* will not overtake them. Yet the "*four winds*" are **held in check until** the "*servants of God*" are **sealed** on their foreheads.

The "*seal*" (*sphragis*) of God is a common NT theme. In John's Gospel he records: "*On Him [Christ] God the Father has placed His seal of approval*" (John 6:27). Paul affirms that all who believe "*the gospel of your salvation*" are "*sealed in Christ for the day of redemption*" (**Eph 1:13-14**; cf. 4:30). In these passages the "**seal**" is defined as the **indwelling Holy Spirit** whose presence in the life is the Christian's guarantee of his inheritance (John 3:33-34; Gal 3:2):

2 Corinthians 1:21-22

Now it is **God** who makes both us and you stand firm *in Christ*. **He** anointed us and **set His seal of ownership on us** and put **His Spirit** in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

2 Timothy 2:19

Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having **this seal**: "*The LORD knows those who are His,*" and "Let everyone who names the name of the LORD abstain from wickedness."

In the **Old Testament** the royal "**seal**" (i.e., signet ring) *protects from change* (Daniel 6:15-17; Esther 8:8), *reveals ownership* (Haggai 2:23; Jeremiah 22:24), and *authenticates the king's decrees* (1 Kgs 21:8; Esther 3:12; 8:10).

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Ezekiel 9 is John's major Old Testament source for the particular idea of a special apocalyptic sealing of God's people. There God prepares to send retributive judgments upon apostate and idolatrous Jerusalem through destroying angels (9:2). In the midst of these *angelic "executioners"* stands a man dressed in white linen with a pen and ink. God commands him:

Ezekiel 9:4-6

Go through the midst of the city. . . and put a **mark on the foreheads** of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst." But to the others He said, "*Follow Him through the city and kill, without showing pity or compassion...* but do not touch anyone who has the mark. Begin at My sanctuary.

The saving "mark" placed upon the righteous remnant in this passage is **the pre-exilic Hebrew letter T (tau)** which was **written in a cruciform-- the form of the cross**. Thus Ezekiel 9 prophetically prefigured the saving efficacy the cross has for the remnant in John's vision.⁷

Satan always counterfeits God's work, in this case: the "**mark of the Beast**."

The **144,000 are sealed**. They appear again in **Rev 14:1**. From this latter passage it is clear that the "seal" of God and the "**name** (onoma) of "*God and the Lamb*" are **synonymous**—just as the "**mark**" (charagma) and "**name**" of the Beast are **synonymous** (13:16).⁸

As in the Old Testament, John uses the divine name as a revelation of God's glory or character, but especially as revealed in Christ (John 17:6-12; 12:28; cf. Exodus 33:18-19; 34:6).⁹

By our faith in God's revelation of Himself in Christ **we are sealed and protected** from *apostasy to the Beast's name* and mark and **escape** God's judgments. The crucial question: "The great day of their wrath has come—who is able to stand" *now becomes*: "**Who are saved from God's wrath by this sealing?**"

John's answer is a **2-fold portrayal of the redeemed community**, first as the **144,000** (OT); then as a "**great multitude which no one could count**" (NT):

Revelation 7:4-8

Then **I HEARD** the number of those who were sealed: **144,000** from all the tribes of Israel. From the tribe of Judah **12,000** were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben **12,000**, from the tribe of Gad **12,000**, from the tribe of Asher **12,000**, from the tribe of Naphtali **12,000**, from the tribe of Manasseh **12,000**, from the tribe of Simeon **12,000**, from the tribe of Levi **12,000**, from the tribe

⁷ Beasley-Murray, *Book of Revelation*, p. 143; cf. Mounce, *Book of Revelation*, p. 167; and Preston and Hanson, *Revelation of Saint John*, p. 99.

⁸ R. P. Martin, "Mark," *NIDNIT* (1976), 2:574.

⁹ H. Bietenhard, "Name" *NIDNTT* (1976), 2:653.

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of Issachar **12,000**, from the tribe of Zebulun **12,000**, from the tribe of Joseph **12,000**, from the tribe of Benjamin **12,000**.

One hundred and forty-four thousand is a **symbolic calculation** composed of the **kingdom number, twelve, times itself times one thousand (12 x 12 x 1000)**. It includes *all who are sealed by God* in opposition to the rest of mankind who **receive the mark of the beast (13:16)**. As such it stands **not for limitation** but for **completeness--the fulness of the redeemed community gathered around the Lamb (14:1)** while *the world wanders after the beast*.

There are **exactly 12,000** from each of **twelve tribes** (though ten tribes no longer existed as identifiable and separate groups even in John's day).

The **12 tribes listed in Revelation 7 do not agree with any of the Old Testament records of the twelve literal tribes of Israel, nor are they in proper chronological order** (Num 1, 2). **Judah, the 4th tribe**, is preeminent now, since from Judah came **the Messiah**. **Dan** is eliminated because of that tribe's continual connection with idolatry (1 Kings 12:29). So also **Ephraim**. This idea of a *spiritual Israel replacing literal Israel* is a common NT theme.¹⁰

Revelation 7:9-10

After this **I LOOKED**, and there before me was a **great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, tribe, people and language**, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing **white robes** and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: **“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”**

John **hears the number** of the sealed **144,000**; then John **looks and beholds** a countless multitude (7:9). This **auditory-to-visual sequence** to describe the **same object** is used multiple times (1:10-12; 5:5-6; 17:1-3). Such double presentations move from an **initial Hebraic, Old Testament symbol (what John hears)**, to a more **universal “all nations” description (what John sees)**.

John is expressing two equally important truths: that *before God sends forth His judgments* He numbers and protects every member of His kingdom, and yet His kingdom contains a multitude beyond man's computation.

Their **“white robes” “belongs to our God. . . and to the Lamb”**. It is **not** our achievements, but Christ's, which has won our victory. In **Revelation 7:11-12** all creation worships!

¹⁰ See Rom 2:28-29; 9:6-8; 11:5-7; Gal 3:26-29; 6:14-16; Phil 3:3; Matt 3:9; 8:11-12; 21:43; 23:37-39.

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Revelation 7:13-14

Then one of the elders asked me, “These in **white robes**—who are they, and where did they come from?” I answered, “**Sir, you know.**” And he said, “These are they who have **come out of the great tribulation**; they have **washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.**”

Dirty clothes in the OT are a judicial metaphor representing **an unclean life** (Isa 64:6; Zechariah 3:3) and **white robes represent innocence before God** (3:4ff). No one can stand in God's final judgment unless their garment is “*without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. . . holy and blameless*” (Eph 5:27), by the “**blood of the Lamb**” (7:14; cf. 1 John 1:7; Heb 9:14: “*How much more then, shall the blood of Christ cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death*”).

Revelation 7:15-17

Therefore, 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. ‘Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For **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.**’

[See Isaiah 49:10; 25:8, Rev 21:2-5; and see 21:22]

There is such a **stark contrast between 6:15-17 and 7:15-17** where the **same Lamb** is pictured as He appears to two groups of humanity. In the hearts of **the proud, self-worshipping multitude** portrayed in 6:15-17 (cf. 9:20-21), the coming of the Lamb strikes a **suicidal terror**. while the righteous find in the Lamb **a protecting and providing Shepherd** (7:16-17).

Rev 7: 17 portrays the great mystery of redemption: **the divine Shepherd (Ps 23) who became the sacrificial lamb (Exodus 12:13) in order to save His wayward sheep (Isa 53:6-8).** **Isaiah** captured well this difference in his double description of **the Day of the LORD**:

The arrogance of man will be brought low and the pride of man humbled; the Lord alone will be exalted *in that day*, and the idols will totally disappear. They will flee to caverns in the rocks... from dread of the Lord, and the splendor of His majesty, when He rises to shake the earth.

Isa 2:17-18, 21 NIV

The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; He will remove the disgrace of His people from all the earth. *In that day* they will say, “Surely this is our God: we trusted in Him, and He saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in Him: let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.

Isa 25:8-9 NIV

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The “**great multitude**” are *already citizens of heaven* (cf. Phil 3:20; Eph 2:6). **This remains consistent.** While those who reject Christ “ *dwell on the earth* ” (6:10; 13:8), those who “**follow the Lamb**” are already seen as those who “ *dwell in heaven* ” (12:12; 13:6,8; 17:14; 18:20).

In the 5th and 6th seals **God's judgment activity is aimed only at those who reject the Lamb and persecute His witnesses.** God's people are **sealed for eternity** and already reckoned as victorious **in heaven** even as they *endure severe tribulations on earth* . **John 16:33.**

Jesus Christ reigns, is the grand lesson of the 7-sealed book. He reigns in all His Gospel agencies; in war, in want, in death, and in the sufferings of the martyrs. In all these He is overturning the world, sealing His chosen, gathering His own to His throne of grace.¹¹

Now only the 7th seal remains. As it is opened all is **hushed** during this ominous period. **Why?**

Revelation 8:1 And when the **Lamb opened the seventh seal,** there was **silence in heaven** for about half an hour.

Silence is often used by the OT prophets **to introduce the Almighty going forth to act in judgment** against wickedness on the great day of the LORD:

Habakkuk 2:20; Zephaniah 1:7; 2:13

But the LORD is in His holy temple; let **all the earth be silent** before Him.

Be silent before the sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near.

Be still before the LORD, all mankind. He has roused Himself from His holy dwelling.

Silence acts as a symbol for the “**day of the LORD**” to culminate the seals.¹²

¹¹ James B. Ramsey, p. 353.

¹² “In reporting the siege of Jerusalem Josephus tells of a great light which appeared as a sign in the *sanctuary for half an hour* (Bell. vi. 5.3)” (Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 179). (Emphasis supplied).