

REVELATION

Study 5: The Seven Seals

In our previous study, we looked at how John's vision of God's heavenly throne room reveals that Jesus the Messiah – the Lamb who was slain but is alive again – is the only who is worthy to lead and guide human history to its intended conclusion. This was symbolized by the Lamb receiving the sealed scroll from the hand of the Almighty God. John's vision reminds us that the Lamb has conquered, and therefore he is the one who can reveal to his people how we are to conquer also.¹

In this particular study, we are going to read and discuss what John sees next as the Lamb begins to break the seven wax seals in order to open the scroll and carry God's plan forward. The breaking of the seven seals is the first of three different cycles of sevens that we will encounter in our reading of Revelation. And so, we need to begin this study with a general overview of how these cycles are structured so that we can read them responsibly and respond to them appropriately.

Seven Seals, Seven Trumpets and Seven Bowls

Revelation 6-11

It's important to note that the things that John sees as the Lamb breaks each seal are not the actual content of what is inside the scroll itself. Think about the nature of how a scroll works. You can not see or read what is written inside of a scroll until all of it's seals on the outside are broken. And so, these things described at the breaking of each seal are intended to prepare us for the revealing of the actual content of the scroll itself – which is revealed later in chapter eleven of the book.

Now, the breaking of the seven seals will be followed by the blowing of seven trumpets which will be followed by the pouring out of seven bowls. It is easy to get lost in all the imagery associated with these three cycles of seven, but one big key to avoiding confusion is to realize that John is not doing what many readers assume he's doing. John is actually not trying to give his readers a literal prediction of specific events that take place at some point in history; he's doing something else.

¹ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 80

For now, it may be helpful to simply notice the way in which these three different cycles of seven are interconnected. If we read carefully, we will recognize that the breaking of the seventh seal includes the seven trumpets, and the blowing of the seventh trumpet includes the seven bowls. Similar to the way that nesting dolls work, the seventh seal contains the seven trumpets and the seventh trumpet contains the seven bowls. Each cycle increases in the severity of judgment² and each culminates with the final judgement and God's kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven.

Listen to the matching conclusions of the seventh seal, the seventh trumpet and the seventh bowl:

Seventh Seal (*Revelation 8*)

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour... Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

Seventh Trumpet (*Revelation 11*)

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he shall reign forever and ever..." Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

Seventh Bowl (*Revelation 16*)

The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake.

As we can see, the seven seals, trumpets and bowls all culminate with the final act of judgement in which evil is destroyed and God's kingdom arrives here on earth as it is in heaven. Therefore, this means that it is likely that the three different cycles of seven are viewing the same time period in history but simply from three different perspectives.

² The seals affect a quarter of the earth (6:8), the trumpets affect a third (8:7-12; 9:18) and the bowls are unlimited and complete.

These three cycles of seven are viewing the entire time period between the resurrection and the return of Jesus. Each cycle reaches the same end, “but from starting-points progressively closer to the end.”³ And so, as we start with the seven seals, we should seek to understand their theological significance rather than trying to decode them as if they were a literal prediction of future events.

The Seals

Revelation 6

The scroll containing God’s plan and purposes has been sealed with seven wax seals that the Lamb must now break in order to open the scroll and to reveal its message. As the Lamb breaks the first four seals, John sees four horsemen who symbolize times of conquest, war, famine and death.

These things are not intended to be viewed as being independent of one another nor are they to be understood as specific isolated events that will take place at some specific period of time in the distant future. Conquest, war, famine and death are grouped together on purpose and are simply the tragic things that tend to describe a normal day in human history. Even more specifically, these are things that the first-century Christians had experienced first-hand. They knew all-too-well what it was like to be on the wrong end of conquest, war, famine and death as they were experiencing the struggle of living life as a persecuted minority under the sword of Roman power and oppression.

These four horsemen symbolize the harsh realities of this world where evil forces and oppressive empires still exist and seek to maximize their power. But John is reminding us that these things are not simply random chaos or the result of evil forces just running free and wreaking havoc upon the earth. These tragic realities are simply part of the process, and they serve a divine purpose. God is in complete control and will work these things out for the good of those who remain loyal to him.

The breaking of the first four seals offers John’s readers a bigger perspective on the tragic realities of the world around them. And they confirm the call to conquer – to stay faithful in the midst of all these things and to patiently endure the tribulation trusting the One who is seated on the throne.

And this leads to the breaking of the fifth seal where John sees a vision of Christians who had been killed for their faithful witness and loyalty to Jesus. John sees the souls of those who had been slain just like the Lamb. These martyrs cry out to God longing for him to avenge their innocent blood.

³ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 40

It's important to try and put yourself in the shoes of the first-century Christians hearing these words from John. The "souls of those who had been slain" would have been people that they knew by name (i.e. Antipas from Pergamum). These are neighbors, friends, relatives and family members. And this vision of the souls who had been slain crying out to God from under the altar reminds us of what it actually means to pick up your cross and follow Jesus. Those words were never intended to just be a metaphor for the loss of certain rights or privileges in life; they were an invitation from Jesus to trust him and to truly follow his way of self-sacrifice with a willingness to lose your life.

These souls under the altar ask God to execute judgement on their persecutors, but they are told to rest and to wait a little longer because more of their fellow Christians still have to die.

However, the breaking of the sixth seal reveals God's ultimate response to all the injustices of this world and the cries of his people. It reassures John's readers that God will avenge those who have remained faithful to the point of death. There is a final day of judgement coming where all of God's enemies – from kings to slaves; from the rich and powerful to the poor and powerless – everyone who has opposed God and his faithful people will experience the consequences of their injustices, iniquity and idolatry.

As John describes the destruction portrayed by the breaking of the sixth seal, he tells us that he saw the people on earth crying out in desperation wondering who on earth could be saved from the wrath of God's judgement. And it's at this point that John stops the action and provides an interlude between the sixth and seventh seal in order to reveal the answer to that very question.

The Saints

Revelation 7

John sees an angel placing a mark of protection on the foreheads of all God's faithful people. John hears that the number of those who received this mark of protection is 144,000. What he hears is a military census where 12,000 are selected from each of the 12 tribes of Israel – totaling 144,000.

So John hears about this army of God's people numbering 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. But then what John turns around and actually sees is a great multitude of people from every nation on earth standing before the throne and singing about the salvation of God and his Messiah and celebrating the ultimate victory of God's kingdom. It's an inspiring vision of hope and promise that brings comfort and encouragement for Christians who are being persecuted and oppressed.

Once again, the contrast between what John hears and then what he actually sees ends up turning all of our preconceived notions about power, conquest and victory completely upside-down. It also reminds us of what God has been up to in the world since the very beginning. God's plan from the very beginning was to create a multi-ethnic family made up of people from every nation on earth. God blessed the family of Abraham (Israel) for the purpose of working through them to bring his blessing to all the families on earth. This greater multi-ethnic family has always been the main goal.

So the 144,000 that John heard about and this great multitude that John actually sees represent the same group of people – all of God's people who have conquered through their faithful witness and loyalty to God and his Messiah. They are those who have come out of the great tribulation and are already experiencing some of the blessings and rewards of the new creation.⁴

This incredible vision of "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands" should have a dramatic effect on how we view the kingdom of God and how we view ourselves as God's people. Michael Gorman writes:

"If Christians around the globe truly understood themselves as part of this international community, and fully embraced that membership as their primary source of identity, mission and allegiance, it is doubtful that so many Christians could maintain their deep-seated national allegiances, or their suspicions of foreigners."⁵

The prophetic message of the book of Revelation continues to unfold. Just as the Lion of the tribe of Judah won his victory as the Lamb who was slain, followers of Jesus are called to be his multi-ethnic army who conquers like he conquered – through sacrificial death rather than military force. We are called to be a new family and to show the world a new way to be human by loving our enemies, praying for those who persecute us and remaining loyal to the Lamb no matter the cost.

John sees the breaking the seventh seal, but before the scroll is opened, seven angels are now given seven trumpets. The prayers of God's people have been heard and will be answered, but for now John's focus shifts to these angels with the seven trumpets. These seven trumpets will unleash warning judgements upon the earth, but the question is, "Will judgements alone lead humanity to repent of their evil or is something else needed in order to bring God's kingdom here on earth?"

⁴ Compare Revelation 7:15-17 with some of the descriptions of the new creation in Revelation 21-22.

⁵ Michael J Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 133