



gracefellowship

Revelation
February 17, 2019
The Lamb and His People

:: Revelation 6:9-8:5

Recap: Last week we found John in God's throne room being shown a vision of the first judgments of God against sin. John was told that the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David had triumphed, but when he looked, he saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain. The Lamb was Jesus and He alone in all the universe was found to be worthy to open the scroll of God's judgments and break the 7 seals that begin the process of God judging the earth both to bring humanity to a point of seeing our need for Him and also bringing justice to the earth against the devastation of sin. We covered the first four seals last week, often described as the 4 horsemen of the apocalypse. These, I believe, are ongoing judgments against humanity over the course of history which God has used to show how broken our world is and how much we need a Savior.

Those horses represented human conquest through war, the removal of peace from the earth, injustice and famine and finally, death.

Today we will see Jesus open the final seals and we will see perhaps the single most important question for humanity in the book asked and answered.

What John has seen in this vision so far has occurred on earth; for the fifth seal the focus shifts to heaven:

The fifth seal = Martyrs of the Christian faith.

:: Revelation 6:9-11

9 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.

10 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?"

11 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, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

John will tell us later in the book of Revelation that there is no Temple in heaven because the presence of God and Jesus is the Temple, however, we do see an altar. This altar seems to unite the themes of sacrifice and prayer. Under the altar John sees the souls of those who had been slain. But look at why they were slain: “because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.”

- As our world continues to spiral out of control, followers of Jesus will be more and more persecuted for our stance on the truth of Scripture. We are seeing that become more of a reality in our culture, but all over the world our Christian brothers and sisters are already facing extreme persecution, even leading to death, for their belief in Jesus and their commitment to the Bible as the true word of God.
- But the word of God is not just their beliefs about the Bible, it is also the witness and testimony they give about Jesus. John says those who are found under the altar of the Lord maintained their testimony. Again, the call of Christians in every age and every culture is to be obedient to Jesus, even to the point of death. We have to ask ourselves as the end draws near and resistance to Jesus continues to rise, if we are all in and if we are willing to give our lives, if necessary, for the sake of the gospel. Here is what I can promise you: the death you might experience on earth will not compare to the life awaiting you in heaven! John has painted a picture for us of the glory of God in His heaven to remind us that this world is not our home and we can stand true in our faith because the end of life on earth is the beginning of eternal life with God!

Illustration: Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, was one of the most famous early martyrs. In AD 110, Ignatius was taken to Rome to be thrown to the wild beasts in the Coliseum. On his way, he wrote letters to the churches of Asia Minor, many of the same churches we have already looked at, expressing his attitude toward martyrdom:

“May I have the pleasure of the wild beasts that have been prepared for me...Fire and cross and battles with wild beasts, mutilation, mangling, wrenching of bones, the hacking of limbs, the crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil- let these come upon me, only let me reach Jesus Christ!” – Ignatius

Church, we have enjoyed the ability to practice our faith openly and for the most part without persecution. But that will not always be the case. When the tide changes, we need to commit beforehand to stand with Jesus no matter the cost.

Look back at the text with me and notice that the martyrs under the altar have a question for Jesus:

10 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?”

They recognize Jesus as worthy to judge the world and all who had a role to play in their deaths. They call him Sovereign; they say He is holy; and they say He is

true. His ability to judge is not the issue- the timing is what they question. "How long...until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"

Jesus has an answer for them:

11 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, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

He first gives them white robes- symbols of purity in faith and victory over trials. Then God tells them to wait a little longer because there are still more who will give their lives in service to Him.

God rarely does things in our way or in our timing. Waiting on God's timing is an essential part of our faith journey.

Illustration: One of my former students posted something on Facebook this week that she has been learning as she and her husband have gone through an incredibly difficult season in their marriage.

It took 3 years of praying for God to break and restore our marriage. It took confession, repentance, community, and a whole lot of growth. And the whole time, I thought it was just [my husband] who needed to be transformed, but boy was I wrong. There were areas in my life that needed to be surrendered to the Lord. He wanted my Unwavering trust. You see, I thought if I prayed faithfully enough, God would quickly and easily answer my prayers and things would be perfect. But if God had answered my prayers to fix things in MY time rather than HIS time, we wouldn't have been stretched and grown in ways that we were. There wouldn't be the level transparency and open communication we have now. God KNOWS what we are going through. He HEARS our cries. He's WITH US in the darkest night. And He is already planning a rescue. It may not be what we think it should look like, but it is far beyond what we need.

Whatever we face in life that we question God's response to, just know that God will act in justice in His sovereign timing. As Jesus opened the 5th seal, He promised the martyrs that ultimate judgment and vindication for their deaths would come...just not yet!

Next, John describes Jesus opening the 6th seal and the focus shifts back to earth.

:: Revelation 6:12-17

12 I watched as he 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,

13 and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind.

14 The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

15 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.

16 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!

17 For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?”

John is going to describe the situations and circumstances leading up to the end two more times through the trumpet judgments and the bowl judgments. At the end of each set of judgments the Day of the Lord has arrived. In Scripture, especially in the OT and the gospels, the day of the Lord is the anticipated time when Jesus will return and set up His eternal Kingdom reign.

When John describes the 6th seal being opened he does so in a way that is consistent with the Day of the Lord throughout God’s Word. Whether these phenomena are literal or metaphorical remains to be seen- I have no reason to think they are not literal- but here is what we can be assured of: the coming of Jesus brings great terror to those who oppose Him.

This judgment is all inclusive as John tells us no one is spared. The people of the earth respond by wishing for death and to be hidden from the wrath of Jesus. In fact, John tells us what people say in response to these events: “The great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?”

This is the question that is most important for humanity to answer as they read this book: “When the day of wrath comes, who can withstand it?”

Among the inhabitants of the earth, the answer appears to be “no one.”

But John is going to tell us the answer next. There is hope! Chapter 7 brings an intermission in the judgments God pours out. Before we read about the final seal judgment, John tells us about another vision he is shown. Look at chapter 7, verse 1.

:: Revelation 7:1-12

1 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.

2 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:

3 “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.”

4 Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

5 From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed,

from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,
from the tribe of Gad 12,000,
6 from the tribe of Asher 12,000,
from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,
from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,
7 from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,
from the tribe of Levi 12,000,
from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,
8 from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,
from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,
from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, 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.

10 And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

11 All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

12 saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

Chapter 6 ends asking "Who can stand the Day of the Lord?" Chapter 7 begins by answering- "Those who are servants of God with His protective seal." Here is what is important for us to know:

God seals us from His wrath, we will never face His divine judgment. However, we are not promised to be held back from the wrath of the beast and his followers.

Prior to the 144,000 being sealed, the angel with the seal commands 4 other angels at the four corners of the earth to hold back the four winds. Side note, for any "flat-earthers" out there, this is not a biblical proof that the earth is flat and has four corners. This is a way to say that "every part of the world." Winds in Scripture are often used to represent God's judgments. The angel with the seal is instructing these 4 angels who hold God's judgments to wait until the 144,000 are sealed. The coming judgments will certainly affect the earth, but at this point they are periodically restrained as God supernaturally protects His children.

The angel with the seal says he is going to put the seal on the forehead of the servants of God. In the ancient practice of slave trading, slaves would often have a mark put on their forehead representing ownership. For God to say He is putting a seal on the foreheads of those who follow Him, represents His specific ownership and protection over His children. This is likely not a literal seal that can be seen. It is probably meant more to identify those who follow Jesus because they live out the ways of the Kingdom.

In Deuteronomy 6 God instructed His people through Moses to keep all His commands. It was the central teaching of the Israelite people. Listen to God's instructions:

:: Deuteronomy 6:4-9

4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.

7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

I don't know that God meant for the people to literally tie these things on their hands and foreheads, but that is exactly what they did! They wrote this teaching on small scrolls, built little boxes to wear on their heads and kept the words of the teaching on their forehead! When God seals us, the NT talks about that being done in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God takes residence in our life and begins to change our minds and our hearts and therefore our actions.

:: 2 Corinthians 1:21-22

21 Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us,

22 set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

:: Ephesians 1:13-14

13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,

14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

So, who are these 144,000 John sees?

There are a couple ways to think about this. First, they are literally 144,000 Jews that God calls specifically into relationship with Himself during the Tribulation period. Second, this is a way to describe all believers in Jesus who are sealed in Him. The true Israel of God is referred to in the NT as all who believe in Jesus for salvation.

Here's why that is possible as an interpretation:

The Tribes John describes is different from the Tribes listed in the OT. The head of the Tribes here is Judah, because that is the Tribe the Messiah came from.

The Tribe of Dan is missing from the list- likely due to its association with idolatry.

The Tribe of Ephraim is missing as well, perhaps because it opposed Judah.

However, the Tribe of Levi is included. This is potentially because the Priests came from Levi and under the new covenant of salvation in Christ, all believers are called priests.

Let's look at the next section of Scripture to see something else to help us understand who these 144,000 people are. John said he "heard" the number of those who were sealed as 144,000, but look at what he sees...

:: Revelation 7:9-12

9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, 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.

10 And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

11 All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

12 saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

John had earlier been told that the Lion of the Tribe of Judah had conquered, but when he turned he saw a Lamb looking as if it were slain. Now he is told there are 144,000 sealed, but what he sees are people too great to count from every corner of the planet. Their cry of worship is a cry that is centered on salvation. The people of God know the salvation of God because Jesus died to make us His people, sealed by His Holy Spirit to live for Him and with Him forever.

As the angels see the worship of those who are sealed, they break out in worship as well. Then one of the elders asks John a question that wraps up this 6th seal.

:: Revelation 7:13-17

13 Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?"

14 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.

15 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.

16 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, 'nor any scorching heat.

17 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.' "

This is the beautiful promise of eternal life in the presence of God! The Lamb who died to save us has cleansed us by His blood. Now the Elder tells John that the Lamb will be our shepherd and will also wipe our tears away and protect us in His presence forever!

As we close this morning, I want us to see one more powerful verse- the opening of the 7th and final seal.

:: Revelation 8:1

1 When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

As we have journeyed through these opening chapters of Revelation there is one thing that is constant: heaven is filled perpetually with the worship of God. When we read that upon the opening of the 7th seal heaven falls silent for an hour and a half, we should sit up and take note!

J. Scott Duvall states, "...the OT often associates silence with divine judgment, and such is the case here. When the seventh seal finally opens, the drama intensifies as heaven waits in awe and anticipation for God to intervene. In addition, the silence creates the setting for God to hear the prayers of the saints, which in turn lead into the trumpet judgments."

The silence of heaven signifies the end of the first judgments and represents God's intervention in the affairs of earth to deal with sin.