

# STUDY 4 -LEADER'S NOTES

## THE CYCLE OF SEVENS

### REVELATION 6-11

#### MAIN POINT

*God discloses his plan to judge evil and save his people and to remind them of the certainty of Jesus' victory and the justice he will bring in the midst of suffering and persecution.*

#### CONTEXT:

Both God (on the throne) and Jesus (also God on the throne) have been praised by all creation, and those around the throne for: their holiness, being creator, for salvation (through sacrifice) and making a Kingdom of people. God is worthy of all praise and all power! This is followed in chapters 6-16 by three cycles of 'seven', that unveil the reality of God's rule:

- Destruction in the form of natural disaster, human warfare (this seems to be judgement in line with Romans 1 - the result of human sin is part of the judgement on human sin)
- God's specific judgement in trumpets and bowls is more like the plagues on Egypt where pharaoh and Egypt are judged for refusing to acknowledge God as creator, but also specifically for their treatment of God's people.
- A helpful description of what is going on: 'The destroyers of the earth will be destroyed' (11:18)

#### THE CYCLE OF SEVEN [SEALS; TRUMPETS; BOWLS]:

Before jumping into the details of the verses, it's worth noting a few things about the three cycle of sevens:

- There is a lot of repeated ideas happening in between these three cycles, which takes us behind the scene for a panoramic view of world history and God's unfolding judgement that will lead to salvation.
- The cycles follow a similar pattern of 4 judgements grouped together + 2 intense judgements + interruption + 1
- It seems the first 6 in each set were happening or imminent for the churches in Revelation, and are still ongoing today.
- The seventh seal appears to be some the climax of judgement that ushers in the new creation and Jesus returns. Similar imagery is used to describe what is occurring at this final judgement - for example flashes of lightening and peals of thunder and an earthquake is common in the seventh of the cycle (Rev 8:5; 11:12; 16:18). This is the same imagery used in the Old Testament to describe when God turns up in judgement.
- This suggests that the cycles are not chronological, but common with the genre, the same events shown from different perspectives, like seeing a replay of a sporting moment repeated from different cameras.

- There's also a growing intensity and urgency as we read each of the subsequent cycles. For example - The 7 seals describe  $\frac{1}{4}$  of people being affected; with the 7 trumpets,  $\frac{1}{3}$  of creation is affected; and the 7 bowls describes the judgement on ALL people. This literary technique is meant to evoke a reaction from the readers to take this judgement and the churches role seriously.
- The interruptions that take place in each cycle are significant (7:1-17 - safety in judgement; 10:1-11:14 - the urgency to witness; 16:15 - Jesus is returning soon so be prepared). They particularly speak of what is happening to the church, and what the church should be doing in the midst of judgement.
- Much of the imagery used in these cycles come straight from the Old Testament - ie. the four horseman in chapter 6 come straight from Zechariah 1; the judgement associated with the trumpets are reminiscent of the plagues God sent on Egypt (as well as the hardening of humanity's heart against God (9:20-21)).

## NOTES:

6:1-8 - The 'four horsemen of the apocalypse' ride out. What they represent is described in verse 8 – death by sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts. Each of these appears as one of the seals of the scroll is broken – the scroll which contains the plan of God for the world. The plan itself is being enacted as the seals are broken.

The rider on the white horse is sometimes thought to be Jesus, because in 19:11f Jesus rides a white horse. However the contexts are different. It is more likely that the rider of the white horse is just like the other riders – an evil force let loose by God's permission (the riders are *given* power) with limited power and authority. The beast is allowed to conquer the saints in 11:7 and 13:7.

The first four trumpets and bowls all seem to go together in the next chapters so it seems to make sense to view the first four seals in the same way (as all referring to parallel evil forces). Similar "four horsemen" images in Zechariah 1 and 6 seem to be the background here, and would again indicate that the horses and riders, even the white one, are the same in nature.

6:9-11 - The fifth seal reveals the souls of those who have been martyred for Jesus are longing for judgement day to arrive and for God to inflict vengeance on his enemies. Antipas in 2:13 was one such person. Judgement day is not coming yet though, they are told, because more Christians need to die as martyrs first. The judgements described in the first five seals are all happening "now", rather than one after another in some kind of chronological sequence – they describe the situation continually faced by the saints until God chooses to judge his creation all to an end.

6:12-17 - As the sixth seal is opened, God finally judges and brings the old creation to an end. The camera pans to a great earthquake and natural disasters as signs of impending doom. The old creation (sky, earth, sun, moon, mountains, islands) is shaken and vanishes. Every person (seven kinds of person in verse 15) is terrified in the face of the anger of God and of the lamb (note: this lamb is not a soft cuddly skipping thing called Peter – his wrath is frightening to kings and generals). This is a picture of judgement day – it has finally arrived. The question (as in Psalm 130:3 and Malachi 3:2) is "who can stand?" when he appears? That is answered in the next chapter.

7:1-12 - The description of the sixth seal is longer than the others, as an interlude in the opening of each one provides more detail. The wind is suddenly held back by four angels, who restrain judgement from falling on everything until God's servants have been sealed, marked out and protected from the oncoming judgement. 1440,000 is  $12 \times 12$  (a complete number of people/tribes squared) multiplied by  $10 \times 10 \times 10$  (a big number) - meaning the complete number of God's people will be saved and it will be many.

This number is heard (4) and then unpacked in terms of Israelite tribes (minus Dan and splitting Joseph into Joseph and Manasseh). Verse 9 makes this even more explicit as the same people are seen from another angle as "a great multitude no-one could number". God will save, from judgement, people from every tribe and nation (as in 5:9) and they will inherit all the promises made to Israel. Praise and worship fill the air as they are saved from judgement (15ff).

7:13-17 - It is now made clear that these people are the ones who have been saved from the great tribulation (the terrible time of difficulty). In 1:9 and 2:10 Christians face tribulation in 'the present', rather than it being just some far off future event.

The blood of Christ washes God's people (that is, their purity before God is due to the sacrificial death of Jesus in their place); they serve God as priests in his temple (see also 5:10), and are sheltered by God from heat and famine (see Isaiah 49:10) while Jesus leads them to pastures green and quiet waters (see Psalm 23) and God wipes every tear from their eyes (see Isaiah 25:8). In other words, those marked out by God will be saved from judgement day, and as the old creation vanishes they will inherit the new one and the promises of God's presence which accompany it.

8:1-5 - The seventh seal is opened after a long interlude since the sixth. There is then silence (a dramatic pause) before we are introduced to seven trumpets and the "prayers of the saints" which God hears - and which in 6:10 brought judgement day (6:12-17).

8:6-12 - The seven trumpets from 8:2 are now blown, in response to the prayers of the saints in 8:3-4 (see 6:9-11). They introduce judgement affecting creation - the earth, sea, and trees (as in 7:3) as well as the waters and the sky, all reminiscent of the plagues of Egypt in Exodus 7-11 (hail, blood, death, darkness). Just as the human world was affected by the horsemen in 6:1-8, so the natural world experiences disaster too (Rom 8:18-25; 2 Peter 3:10-12).

8:13-9:12 - The eagle introduces great woes ("woe" is repeated three times for added effect, as in "holy holy holy" in 4:8, but also because there are three trumpets left). These are limited, and discriminate between believers and unbelievers (e.g. 9:4) as did some of the Egyptian plagues (e.g. Exodus 9:1-7). The first "woe" is the fifth trumpet which unleashes a plague of demonically-stirred hideous locusts whose sting makes people despair and long for the seeming relief of death. This plague is limited to five months.

9:13-21 - Four restrained angels are unleashed on the world, leading 10,000 x 10,000 cavalry troops. Every aggressive military empire has, while worshipping power and domination, eventually suffered catastrophic defeat and humiliation - a foretaste of what is to come for those who reject Jesus (a final battle is seen again in chapters 16, 19, and 20). These things should inspire unbelievers to repent of not worshipping God, which 9:20 reveals is actually to worship demons, who stand behind idols of every kind encouraging

murders, sorceries (the word refers to “black magic”, and especially when linked to murder can refer to voodoo-like death rituals, poisons, or potions used to provoke abortions), sexual immorality and thefts. The order of these sins, and the perhaps slightly odd inclusion of theft, may be due to the Ten Commandments: do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal (see a similar underlying pattern in 1 Timothy 1:9-10).

10:1-11 - Just as chapter 7 was an interlude between the sixth and seventh seal, so chapters 10-11 are an interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet. Attention is drawn to this section. Both interludes concern God’s people in the midst of the judgements described: their salvation from every nation (7) and now their witness to every nation (10-11).

In 10:1-11 John receives messages concerning God’s plan to be fulfilled in line with the word of the prophets (10:7) and is commissioned to proclaim (some of) them. Just as the prophet Ezekiel found (see Ezekiel 2-3), God’s word can be sweet and bitter: the message of judgement on God’s enemies is good for the saints (see 6:10) but also unpleasant to take to heart. The message concerns (verse 11) many nations – a universal context as in Revelation 5:9 and 7:9 (22:2).

11:1-14 - We will spend more time on this section next week.

11:15-19 - The seventh trumpet ushers in the proclamation of God’s everlasting kingdom, which leads to worship from the crowned elders (see 4:4). The nations may rage against the Lord and his anointed one (as in Psalm 2) but God will win on the last day, a day of rewards and punishments, when the temple of God in heaven itself will be opened up to us, even the holy of holies itself (where the ark, God’s presence is).