

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

Although specific details of the contents of the book now in Jesus' hand (5:7) are never fully revealed, it would seem to be the full panorama of God's eternal purpose in dealing with man on earth. From chapter 6 through the end of chapter 16, we see three series of "sevens", including seven seals, (6:1 – 8:5), seven trumpets, (8:6 – 9:21), and then seven bowls of wrath, (15:1 – 16:21). As the seals are broken, we see the coming of Christ and the spread of the gospel, through persecution of the church, and then following through successive judgments against man which culminates with the scene of final judgment.

There are two main theories regarding the timeline or progression of the three series of seven items. First (see Figure 1, below), some would say the three series are to be understood as occurring in parallel, or beginning and ending at relatively the same time. This is suggested when one compares the seven trumpets with the seven bowls of wrath, which shows the same objects on the earth affected but increasing intensity of God's judgment in the bowls. With this thinking, we see the seventh seal opens the series of the trumpets, which seem to provide more specific details regarding the warnings of the seals that God gives to the wicked before ultimate judgment. Again, the seven plagues or woes emerge from the seventh trumpet and in parallel show other aspects of the overthrow of the wicked as previously discussed. This theory claims all three sevens are simultaneous, although the trumpets and bowls are more limited in their scope of time and deal with the issues facing the immediate situations "...which must shortly come to pass," (1:1).

The second and more traditional theory (Figure 2) suggests these three series occur in direct succession (consecutive order, one following another), with the bowls of wrath following the trumpets, which follow the seals. Some scholars say the rising intensity of the listed judgments suggests progressive interventions by God with each new series. For example, with the judgments of the seals, one-fourth of the earth is involved, whereas one-third is involved in the trumpet judgments. With the bowls, all the earth seems to be involved, as these "are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended." Another example involves the seventh seal, after which the trumpets are given to the seven angels. This clearly indicates a succession from one series to another. We see the sequences within the different series vary, and the effects of the judgments seem to differ

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

somewhat. Perhaps these three series show a progressive degree of punishments meted out to the world to provide sterner and more pointed warnings to men before it is too late to repent.

Regardless, whether these three lists of seven judgments occur in parallel or in succession, the meanings and results of the events remain the same. Interestingly, as in most of the visions of the Revelation, no persons are identified as living characters in these visions, no specific historical events are clearly defined, and no absolute time periods are specified. We must remember that we are seeing visions of concepts and not specific historical details. It is much less important to assign specific identities and timeframes to these visions to satisfy our curiosity than to understand the spiritual message being presented. Satan has *always* used evil men throughout history to carry out his wicked plans and try to destroy the people of God.

In chapters 6, we will see the visions of all but the seventh seal, which will introduce the next section of the seven trumpets in chapter eight. In chapter seven, there is an interlude between the sixth and seven seal, where we see the remnants of spiritual Israel sealed with God's seal on their foreheads. This will separate them from those who later are marked as belonging to the beast/ Satan (13:16).

CHAPTER 6

Once the Lamb breaks the first seal, one of the four living creatures cries out in a loud voice, "COME," obviously heard throughout heaven and earth. The KJV adds, "...and see," as if to speak to John, but this is not present in the original language. The call is for the first of the horsemen and their riders to come forth. The symbol of horsemen patrolling and roaming the earth was used before in Zechariah (1:8-11). The first vision shows a rider on a white horse. This rider has been given a crown (*stephanos*, victory crown) and a bow, and his purpose was to conquer (*nikao*) the earth. There is speculation regarding the identity of this rider. Although this rider's purpose is clear, the nature of the conquering is not. Many interpret this rider to represent 'generic' conquerors or victorious military might

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

in general, perhaps Rome or the Parthians in particular. The Parthians arose from the Scythians and ruled as an eastern superpower from 247 BC to 224 AD, stretching from the Mediterranean in the west to India and China in the east. They continually plagued both these western and eastern countries for centuries, before falling to outside invaders and internal revolts.

Most commentators believe this rider to be the Christ. This first rider begins the work of conquering the hearts of men as the gospel is sent out to the world, and the very symbol of a heavenly white rider going forth to conquer the earth portrays the basic message of the entire revelation. The horse is white, the heavenly color of purity and holiness. The bow was often used metaphorically in the Old Testament, such as in Psalm 7:12 where God has *“bent His bow, and made it ready”* against His enemies. Again, in Hab. 3:8-13, we see *“His bow was made bare”* or ready for war with evil. His enemies fall from His arrows (Ps. 45:5). The revelation is replete with the idea of the victorious Christ conquering through the gospel (3:21; 17:14). His strength is not military might, but the power of the gospel, as revealed by the Holy Spirit and preached by the apostles. This Rider is victorious by conquering the souls of men for God.

After Jesus breaks the second seal, the second creature repeats the word, “Come.” This time a red horse emerges from the background. The color red typically suggests war and bloodshed. Those who suggest the white horse is generic militarism also believe the red horse suggests a similar general message of carnage and slaughter from warfare throughout the earth. If the white horse symbolizes Christ, however, then it seems much more likely that this is specific bloodshed directed at the children of God. It foretells of the persecution that would follow the preaching of the gospel. From the Jews to Nero to Domitian, we see a recurring pattern of hatred, distrust, and persecution of Christians. The rider of the red horse is given power to take peace from the earth, referring to the peace of the followers of God. All who take up their cross must remember the words of Jesus: *“Think not that I came to send peace on the earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword”* (Matt.10:34). And again: *“All who live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution”* (II Tim. 3:12). In addition, it was granted that *“men should slay one another.”* We see the slaughter of believers by the governing authorities. The word for slay, *sphazo*, is the same as is used for the sacrificed

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

Lamb in Rev. 5:6 and also the souls under the altar in 6:9. The sword given to take this peace is the short and broad *machaira* of the Roman soldier, and here symbolizes persecution. It is the same sword referenced by Jesus in Matt. 10:34, and the same word is even used in the Septuagint translation of Gen. 22:6 & 10 for the sacrificial knife to be used by Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

Jesus now breaks the third seal, and the third creature proclaims, “Come.” A black horse rides forth, holding a pair of scales in his hand. Black is usually presented as the color of grief, mourning, and affliction. It is devoid of light and goodness. Here we are seeing Satan creating grief and woe for the persecuted through economic hardship and poverty (also a theme in 13:17). The scales symbolize that basic necessities such as food would be restricted and measured out. They also indicate scarcity of necessities for believers, with the color black indicating the grief and suffering that would follow. The “measure” of wheat was a dry measure of less than one quart and about the amount able to support a man for a single day. Barley was one third the cost of wheat and thus more could be purchased to sustain a few more (such as a family). The denarius was an average day’s wages (Matt. 20:2). This analogy suggests that if a believer could barely live on his day’s wages, then his family would not have enough with so little food for such a high cost. The economic hardship Christians would face by not sacrificing to the emperor (if he and his family were not executed) or by not joining trade guilds would be immense. Forced to leave occupations and accept lower wages, and often to leave homes and live in poverty, (not to mention the social stigma and rejection caused by serving Christ), even the faith of the most devout would be strained. Truly, the second and third riders portray a grim and sobering picture of the effects of first century religious prejudice and persecution. Yet, we see no restrictions are to be placed on oil and wine, the staples of luxury. It often seems that evil is rewarded in this life and good is punished, even today in our modern society of plenty. No wonder materialism and comfort still draw us away from serving the Lord. We must remember Moses, who chose rather to “endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin” (Heb. 11:25).

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

We now see the fourth seal broken and the fourth living creature say, "Come." Another horse emerges from the background, an ashen or sickly-pale color (*chloros*) symbolic of disease and death. The rider is named Death, and Hades inevitably follows closely behind him. The two are always mentioned together in the Revelation, but Christ still has the keys of death and Hades (1:18). Hades is the unseen place of spirits before judgment and is not the same as Hell (*Gehenna*, the place of torment for the unrighteous after judgment). They are allowed here to collect their toll, but will eventually themselves be cast into the lake of fire (20:14). They are given authority to kill one fourth of the earth, those taken by the sword and famine and pestilence by the previous two riders, as well as beasts of the earth. Some scholars believe these four categories are referring to the riders' work in the entire world, reminding us that Christians also suffer from the judgments brought on all the unrighteous. It seems more likely that these speak about Death's work in the world as it affects the persecuted church. We see four categories listed by which Death operates: **1)** the *sword*, here the *rhomphaia* or long two-edged Thracian sword of military conquest (instead of the *machaira* previously used to suggest persecution); **2)** *famine* and *hunger*, especially from the poverty imposed on Christians by persecution; **3)** *death*, probably referring to pestilence and pandemic disease; and **4)** *wild beasts*. This list might seem an odd pairing at first, but we are actually seeing a reference to similar judgments pronounced on disobedient Jerusalem found in Ezekiel 5:16-17 and 14:21. Whether these calamities refer to judgments on the entire earth or just the effects on persecuted church, they still remind us that our time in this world is never promised to be easy and without trouble, despite the victory we have already won.

The fifth seal is broken, and John now sees the sacrificial altar before God's throne, which was not previously mentioned. Beneath this altar, we see the souls of those martyred for their testimony to the world. Likely they represent those killed by the red horse and rider (second seal, 6:4). As "*life is in the blood*" (Lev.17:11 & 14), the sacrificial blood was to be poured out at the base of the altar. As the blood was poured, it symbolized the life of the martyrs being offered to God. Even John was experiencing this same persecution. They cry out, "*How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood...?*" Obviously, the Christian persecution was already well in progress,

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

having really started decades earlier with the Jews shortly after the beginning of the church. These martyrs each have a white robe of holiness and are told to continue their rest in Paradise until their number is full or complete. They cry out an important and pertinent question, one that we even ask today: *“How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”* This request might seem troublesome at first, as if they are angry and vengeful and impatient regarding their mistreatment and wrongful punishment. However, we must remember that now they are in Paradise and out of harm’s way, and they have been freed from the petty and selfish motives and emotions that plague us as human beings. They have need of nothing more, as they are fully comforted by God. They ask a legitimate question, as more will suffer if persecution is not stopped, and to the world it may appear that God is unable to bring this unrighteous persecution of the saints to a just and rightful conclusion. They are petitioning the only One who can, with full justice and mercy and truth, correct the situation. They are not asking for *revenge* for themselves, but rather that God *avenge* their blood and punish the wicked to comfort those who still suffer and show the world His full glory and power over sin and death. To those who have left this world, time has no meaning and there is no reason to hasten events until the proper time is fulfilled, something about which we must constantly remind ourselves.

After the sixth seal is broken, a great earthquake occurs which is accompanied by great and terrible scenes in the heavens and on earth: the sun turns black, the moons appears red like blood, the stars fall from the sky, the sky splits apart like a rolled scroll, and all mountains and islands of the earth are moved out of their place. This is not a picture of the destruction of the world and end of time, as many believe. This scene should be familiar as the ‘great and terrible day of the Lord’ found in several places throughout scripture: Isa. 13:6-16 & 34:14; Ezek. 32:7; Joel 2:1-2,10,30-31 & 3:15; Matt. 24:29; Acts 2:16-21; II Peter 3:10-14. The most complete and familiar references would be Isaiah 13:6-16 and Acts 2:16-21. The Isaiah reference is clearly a prophecy about the judgment and destruction of the Babylonian empire and restoration of Israel, the people of God. The Acts reference clearly suggests a day or time of judgement against the Jews and a spiritual upheaval and transformation, which was the inception of the church as God’s new people. Some believe this scene foreshadows the end of the

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

world (as in 20:11-15), which is possible. However, it could also reference the end of the current persecutor, the Roman Empire. Either way, we are seeing the end of the persecuting world powers (19:19-21). This is the final answer given to the martyred saints of verse 9. God will avenge, in His time.

The responses of men to these scenes of complete destruction are predictable. All classes of mankind will undergo this judgment and reckoning, from the greatest king to the lowest slave. The descriptions of the extremes to which the unrighteous will go to avoid God were also used previously in scripture: **1)** by Hosea, about the destruction of Samaria by the Assyrians (Hos. 10:80; **2)** by Isaiah, regarding Jerusalem's fall to the Babylonians (Isa. 2:19); and **3)** by Jesus, about the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans (Luke 23:30). When they all understand the glory and righteousness of God, they would rather hide or die a terrible death than face God's judgment. Ironically, they will still experience both. Given this frightening picture, verse 17 asks the rhetorical question, "who is able to stand?" No one can avoid God, but there are those who are able to stand because of their deliverance. We will see them in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7

Immediately following the scene of the sixth seal, there is a break or interlude before the next seal is broken. We have a complete change of scenery, now focused on the earth. Four angels are standing at the four corners of the earth and holding back the four winds of the earth. The heavy use of the number 4 here recalls things of the earth or world or creation. Everything is perfectly still and quiet, suggesting a restraining or holding back of God's judgment. Wind is used in scripture to convey great force, as the "great tempest" of the spread of evil (Jer. 25:32), or the destructive power of God toward evil (Jer. 49:36). We clearly see God's complete control over the creation. Some have suggested, from other similar references in the scriptures, that the earth stands for the unregenerate world, the sea for the instability and turmoil of society, and the trees the great men of the world. We next see another angel who appears with the rising sun, holding the seal of God. This is not the same type of seal which help the scroll or book closed. The seal of a monarch or powerful person was his

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

personal identification, to which he could mark and thus safeguard his possessions and validate legal documents. It was a sign of full authority and gave its bearer full rights and privileges to the user. It is often referred to in scripture, such as for Pharaoh and Joseph (Gen. 41:42), Ahasuerus with Haman and later Mordecai (Esther 3:10), and even with the sealing of Jesus' tomb (Mat..27:66). It is also used in the NT in a spiritual sense of God's seal (II Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13 & 4:30; John 6:27).

The new angel commands to the restraining angels: "*Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads.*" Clearly judgment is coming, but first it is important to clearly mark those who are believers. This word, seal (*sphragizo*), means to set a seal upon with a stamp or signet ring, to attest to ownership or validity of the thing claimed (as mentioned above). A seal indicated protection against tampering, full ownership, and certification or authority. Thus, before heaven and the world, God is attesting to His ownership of these believers and their right as children to claim God as their Father. This is a spiritual sealing and not a literal external mark, as some would believe today: It is a marking of the heart. In Ezekiel's vision (9:1-11), he also witnessed God marking the foreheads of the righteous so they would be spared His wrath. Even today, as we put on Christ, we are sealed as God's possession through the blood of Christ (I Peter 2:9; Eph. 1:13 & 4:30).

The number sealed is 144,000. This is not meant to be an exact figure of the saved (as some religious denominations believe), but rather a *symbolic* numbering of completeness. The number **3** is the divine number, **12** is the number of organized religion or God's covenant people, and **1000** reveals ultimate completeness (**10**, the number of physical of completeness, multiplied by itself 3 times); we have 12 X 12 X 1000 (**3** things multiplied together), or **144,000** - not a set figure but the sum total of God's people. This number suggests that the complete and proper number of believers will be sealed to be with God forever. Those marked are portrayed as the sons of Israel, and 12,000 from each tribe are sealed. This does not refer to the literal tribes of Israel, as the tribe of Dan and half tribe of Ephraim are not even mentioned.

We next see a great multitude from every nation standing before God's throne and the Lamb. This innumerable multitude has parallel in the promise to

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

Abraham (Gen. 13:1 & 15:5), and is reiterated in the New Testament (Gal. 3:29). They are clothed in white (purity) and carry palm branches in their hands in celebration. This is reminiscent of the Feast of Tabernacles every Fall, celebrating God's protection in the wilderness. On the first day, the people would rejoice before God waving palm branches (Lev. 23:40). No one could count this great multitude, but God could do so and only He knew them completely. This innumerable multitude has parallel in the promise to Abraham (Gen. 13:1 & 15:5).

The multitude sings a song of praise similar to those of chapters 4 and 5, and indeed now all the host of heaven surrounding the throne fall on their faces and worship God, harkening back to the same scenes of praise in the previous two chapters. The blessing of verse 12 is very similar to that of verse 5:12. John is asked a question by one of the 24 elders, regarding this multitude robed in white: who are they? Not knowing the answer, John refers back to the one who questions him. The answer is that they are those who have suffered from the great tribulation and have spiritually survived, here stated as doing so by having "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb." This ironic picture shows the effect of persecution and martyrdom in the name of Christ does not destroy or weaken the believer, but rather makes them invincible and eternal. The red of Jesus' bloodshed has the opposite effect of washing the robes black with sin and making them white with righteousness.

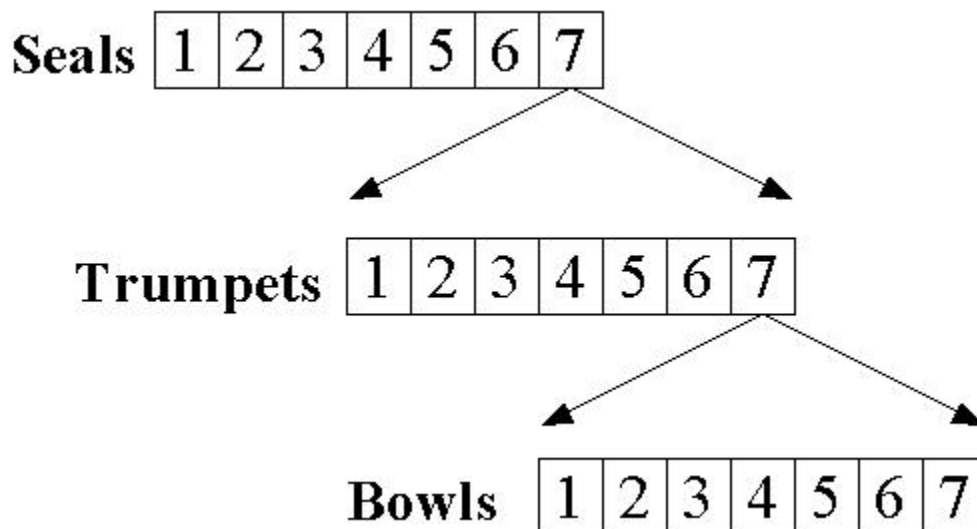
Much is said and written about the phrase "come out of the great tribulation" in verse 14. First, the verb for 'come' here is a *continuous coming* in the Greek, indicating an ongoing process from the past (inception of the church) to the foreseeable future. Jesus reminded his disciples of a "great tribulation" to occur with the people of Jerusalem when it was destroyed (Matt. 24:21 & 29). We also remember the persecution which disciples suffered during the time of Nero. The Roman period of significant Christian persecution lasted nearly 250 years. Jesus had warned His disciples that in the world they would have tribulation (John 16:33), and Paul warned that "all who would live Godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (II Tim. 3:12). Unfortunately, persecution and tribulation will never end for the followers of Christ until the world ends. Clearly, this tribulation does *not* refer to a specific 7-year period of time following a future rapture of the saints and before a 1000-year reign of Jesus on the earth, which is central to the

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

premillennial philosophy. None of these specific teachings is found in scripture. Paul said, “Through *many* tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God.”

This multitude of saints are before the throne and serve God day and night in His temple. The layout and structure of the ancient tabernacle and temple always provided a metaphorical picture of heaven and should have been understood by the Jews. Chapter 21:22 states that there will be no temple in heaven. The concept of the temple (*naos*) properly means “sanctuary”, and here we see God’s people in heaven will be abiding in a spiritual sanctuary in the immediate presence of God. No longer will the saints experience hunger or thirst or sadness or fatigue, as all earthly attributes which weigh us down in this life will be forever gone. Even our thinking and emotions will be changed, as they will no longer be filtered through the human frailties of fear, anxiety, tiredness, anger, selfishness, and pride. In this way the burdens and cares we left behind on earth will never return to disturb our focus on God and our continual praise. The chapter ends with a comparison with Psalm 23, with Christ as our shepherd forever guiding us in joy and security with God.

Figure 1. Sequential View:



THE REVELATION OF JOHN

Figure 2. *Recapitulation (repeating or parallel) View:*

