

When God Is on the Throne: Discovering the Mysteries of Revelation

Study Guide on Revelation 6-7—Week 5 (Sunday, Oct. 4)

Background: As John narrates his visions of the things that “must soon take place,” he describes in chapters 6-20 the great suffering, destruction, and death that must occur before God establishes his kingdom in its fullness. The primary goal is to assure these early Christians that God is in control in spite of appearances and that he will reward those who remain faithful.

Much of chapters 6-16 revolve around three different series of sevens that reveal calamities that will strike the earth—the 7 seals, the 7 trumpets, and the 7 bowls. The three series are similar in form and content. The first four elements of each series describe consequences on earth, and the sixth and seventh elements bring the series to a climactic conclusion. The fifth element is the one that shows the distinctiveness of the particular series. In the seven seals (this week’s text), the fifth seal clarifies that the series mainly concerns the martyrs who die for their faith.

The series of judgments should not be read as though they are in chronological order, nor should they be understood literally. They should be read as impressionistic rather than descriptive, more poetic than scientific. John is using common apocalyptic imagery in these visions, such as earthquakes, wars, famines, falling stars, the moon turning blood-red, and others. Long before John wrote, these images had been used often in the Old Testament (especially Daniel) and in many other Jewish writings. They describe not what will literally occur in history so much as they reveal the earthly and cosmic significance of the events that have begun to take place.

Text: As the first four seals of the scroll are broken (6:1-8), the famous “four horsemen of the Apocalypse” come riding out, bringing judgment, destruction, and death. The rider on the white horse has been identified by some interpreters as a positive sign—the advancement of the kingdom of God—but by others as simply the spirit of conquest in the world. The latter view seems more likely given the nature of the next three riders. The second rider brings war and the killing that goes with it, while the third brings famine, resulting in horribly-inflated prices for basic necessities. The fourth horse, the famous pale horse (the color of death), is ridden by Death itself, followed by Hades (the place of the dead, the grave, a place dreaded by all).

The fifth seal (6:9-11) takes the reader from earth to heaven, where those who have died for their faith are under the heavenly altar. As suggested above, this seal is the focus of this section, and their position under the altar suggests not only their nearness to God but also the significance of their spilled blood (see Leviticus 4:7). They are seen as sacrificial offerings to God. The sixth seal (6:12-17) reveals cosmic events, affecting not only the people of the earth but the entire universe. Then comes an unexpected interlude before the seventh seal is broken.

The interlude of 7:1-17 heightens the tension in waiting for the last seal to be opened. But more importantly, it answers the final question of chapter 6: Who can stand in the face of the horror and destruction of the first six seals? The answer is that only the faithful can stand. They can be assured and comforted—countless throngs of faithful Christians ultimately will be protected by God. There are two visions in chapter 7, the first on earth where 144,000 receive a seal protecting them from the destruction. The second is in heaven, where an innumerable crowd from all nations stands before the throne of God, worshipping God and the Lamb.

Do these visions point to all faithful Christians or just the martyrs? It is difficult to be sure, but most think the first vision is about the martyrs. The number 144,000 is symbolic: 12 is associated with God’s people (the 12 tribes and apostles) and 10 with completeness; the multiplier 1,000 (10x10x10) signifies a very large number. John expects many to be martyred in the coming years. The fact that they are from the 12 tribes undoubtedly refers to the new Israel, the church. The second vision (the multitudes in heaven in 7:9-17) may represent the martyrs again, stressing their countless numbers and ethnic and national diversity. On the other hand, this vision may be better understood to refer to all of God’s faithful, not just the martyrs.

Discussion Questions

1. These two chapters (6-7) speak of Jesus as the Lamb. Where is this imagery found earlier in the book? Discuss the fascinating oxymoron, “the wrath of the Lamb,” (6:16) and why John offers this unusual phrase. Then discuss why the Lamb is also the shepherd in 7:17. Why do these images aid our understanding of the work of Christ in a way that normal prose does not?
2. The martyrs appear to be portrayed in sacrificial terms “under the altar” in heaven. What might it mean to think of martyrs killed for their faith as sacrifices? And why must they wait until the “full number of their fellow servants” have been martyred as they were?
3. When the martyrs in heaven ask, “How long ... until you avenge our blood” (6:10), are they wanting personal vengeance? Is this a Christian way for us to think about the wicked who oppress the righteous? How do we balance love of enemy with our desire for justice to be done?
4. What does the fact that John writes of a “great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language” say about the nature of God’s people? What might it say about our occasional prejudices (racial, ethnic, national, etc.)?
5. Some people in every generation have been quite sure that they were living not only in the last period of earth but in the last few days (or years). What does the book of Revelation (up to this point) have to say about thinking we are living at the end of time? Are we? In what sense?
6. At times the world seems to be spinning out of control. What might these chapters imply about how we should think about and respond to the evils that surround us?