

The Seven Seals

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[0 : 00] I have a confession to make. That is when I was mapping out the series in the book of Revelation a few months ago. It did not occur to me that we would be preaching on the four horsemen of the apocalypse on Mother's Day.

So I apologize for that. Happy Mother's Day, by the way. I actually think it fits. I do. I do. Strife, famine, pestilence. Sounds like being a mother of a preschooler. Sounds like a typical day in the life. We are looking at the book in Revelation.

We've been looking at it for a few weeks. I want to start this week with a reference to somebody that some of you probably are familiar with. Viktor Frankl was a psychiatrist who was alive during World War II and experienced firsthand the horrors of the concentration camp.

And being a psychiatrist, one of the things that he noticed during his time there was that there was a vast disparity between how people responded to and handled the horror and the suffering of those camps.

[1 : 09] He saw people who were smart and strong and tough crumble into dust. And he saw other people, very unlikely people, actually not only survive but in a few cases thrive in inexplicably horrible conditions.

And one such young woman he talks about in his book, which is Man's Search for Meaning. A young woman who was cut off from her family, had been taken, separated from them.

She had been subjected to all kinds of torture and horrible experiences. And she knew that she would probably be dead within the week. Nevertheless, she was cheerful.

And he realized that she was in her right mind. And so he asked her, how could you possibly be cheerful? And she said, well, it's because I've had what can only be described as a spiritual awakening.

I'm alive, spiritually alive in a way that I've never been before in my life. I never even thought something like this was possible. And she said, it's only possible because of the suffering that I've endured.

[2 : 17] And it led to a great realization in Viktor Frankl's life. And that is this, that suffering is inevitable. But the thing that makes the difference between whether suffering crushes us or leads to our not only surviving but possibly even thriving, it doesn't matter how smart you are, how strong you are, how tough you are.

The thing that matters most is this, how do you answer the question of meaning? When you look at the suffering that you're experiencing in your life, what does it mean? Some religions say that suffering is divine punishment.

Some religions say that suffering is merely an illusion. Secular humanism in the West says that there is no meaning. It's all meaningless suffering. Christianity says something very, very, very different.

Christianity says that it is only possible to make sense of our suffering, it's only possible to make sense of our story, by looking at God's story.

By seeing how our story and our experience fits into this much bigger story. That's the only way we can do it. And that's why we're looking at the book of Revelation, because this is where we see the story laid out.

[3 : 34] Revelation was written to people who were suffering. They were facing persecution. They really felt as though they were powerless in their society. They felt as though the end was near, that there was really no hope for them.

And Revelation is written poetically, with vivid imagery, because it's aimed at the imagination.

Revelation is, it's meant to help people who are suffering and struggling, reimagine that suffering in

light of God's story.

It's meant to reveal the truth about what is really going on, despite appearances. It's meant to help us make meaning out of the suffering that we experience.

And so that's why we're looking at it. And this week we're going to be looking at Revelation 6, verse 1 through 8, verse 5. We heard most of that read beautifully by Ellen a little while ago.

We had to omit some of it for the sake of time, but we'll cover all of it. And this is the place in Revelation where the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, has taken the scroll, which is the purpose of God in the world, God's will, and the Lamb has begun to break the seals open.

[4 : 46] Seven seals. And you know, in the book of Revelation, seven is a very important number. It's structured all around multiple series of sevens, just like the seven days of creation.

And so what we have here in the seals is the summation of the history of God's people. This tells us the whole story. Past, present, and future. And this is a pattern that we look at, and we might think of it like this.

This is the life cycle of Christians. It's the life cycle of the church, beginning, middle, and end. And it's the life cycle that plays out all through history, but it's also a cycle that plays out in the life of every Christian.

It's a cycle that was mirrored in the life and ministry of Jesus himself. And so as we look at these seals being opened, we're going to see six phases of the Christian life cycle.

First, there is victory. It all begins with victory. And then there is conflict. Conflict ensues. And then that leads to martyrdom and death.

[5 : 50] And then that ultimately gives way to resurrection. And then lastly, this all produces worship, Sabbath worship. So those are the six phases of the Christian life cycle.

Let's pray, and then we'll open God's Word together. Lord, we thank you for your Word. And we thank you that there are places in Scripture aimed not only at our intellect, not only at our hearts, but that there are entire sections of Scripture aimed squarely at the imagination.

Your Word tells us that you're a God who's able to do far more abundantly than we can ask or imagine. And so we need bigger imaginations so that we will be able to fathom all that is possible with a God like you.

It's in your Son's name that we pray. Amen. So first we look at victory. The first four seals that are opened, each of the first four seals releases one of the famous four horsemen, so-called four horsemen of the apocalypse.

Now these are very well known in pop culture. Sadly, I think that they're often misunderstood. The key to understanding the four horsemen is to understand the context.

[7 : 02] If you were here last week, we saw that all of this is taking place in a great heavenly worship service. And previously, what we looked at last week in chapter 5, the Lamb of God has just ascended to the throne.

Remember, all heaven was waiting and then the Lamb arrives and all heaven breaks out singing in worship. And we said, this is the ascension of Christ from the perspective of heaven.

Jesus died, He rose, He appeared to His disciples, and He ascended into heaven. But before He ascended, He made a promise. He promised that after He departed, another would come.

The Comforter, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit. And so the key to understanding the four horsemen is to understand this. If Revelation chapter 5 shows us the ascension from the perspective of heaven, what comes after the ascension?

Pentecost. Pentecost. The four horsemen are Pentecost. This is the unleashing of the Holy Spirit.

[8 : 10] These are heavenly warhorses of the Spirit-filled church going out into the world to proclaim the gospel. And you say, well, that's an odd image. But it's not if your mind is saturated with Old Testament imagery.

And you thought back perhaps to Zechariah, the prophet, who had a vision, a strange vision of God turning His people into His warhorse. That's exactly what's happening here.

God's warhorse, His people, His Spirit-filled church going out into the world to proclaim and enact the victory of the gospel. And we see that very clearly with the white horse.

It says in verse 2, And I looked, and behold, a white horse. And its rider had a bow. And a crown was given to him. And he came out conquering and to conquer.

You know, back in the days of Noah, after the flood, God promised that He would never bring that kind of judgment again. And to give His people a symbol of His promise, He hung His warbow in the

sky.

[9 : 10] He's taken that warbow back down again. He's taken the crown. And He's gone out as a conquering king. And the gospel will be proclaimed to the four corners of the earth.

And if there was any doubt that this white horse is not the victorious Christ, we see the white horse show up again in Revelation chapter 19. This is the victorious Christ announcing the victory of the gospel.

And it's very important for us to remember this. That the Christian life begins with victory. I know some of you are struggling right now.

You feel hopeless. The great battle has already been won. Everything that we do as Christians, everything that we face, everything that we experience, is done in the light of a victory that has already been accomplished.

We're living between the victory and the culmination, when the victory has been fully enacted in every corner of the universe.

[10 : 12] It all begins with victory. Everything we do is a response to that victory. So that's the white horse. This is the victory. The beginning of the Christian life. Now, what do we do with the remaining horses?

You say, well, it's easy to do that with the white horse. But are you really going to say that these other three horses are the spirit-filled church going out into the world? And I would say, absolutely. If we look at the victory, the victory then leads to conflict. All of God's people should expect conflict in our lives.

This is part of our story. It's part of the story. The red horse comes as the seal is broken and takes away peace and brings a sword to divide people.

Jesus himself said in Matthew 10, Do not think that I've come to bring peace. I've not come to bring peace. I bring a sword. Jesus divides people.

[11 : 12] The gospel divides people. The gospel divides friends. It divides families. It divides governments. It divides institutions. The gospel divides.

And that's good news. Because Jesus is shaking up all the old alliances. He's shaking up all the old loyalties.

He's turning families and racial groups and ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes and political alignments. He's turning all of that upside down. And the reason is what we see in the next chapter. It's because his plan is to build one great worldwide global family. And so those old loyalties and alliances, they have to give way to the new global family of God.

So the gospel brings division and strife between people. Then the black horse is released.

[12 : 10] And the black horse carries scales. And there's a reference to wheat and barley prices. And then there's a reference to oil and wine being left untouched. And it seems kind of odd until you understand the context.

This is describing a kind of famine. A partial famine. Where it costs so much to buy wheat or barley that an entire day's wages will only buy enough food for that day.

So this is describing a kind of subsistence, hand-to-mouth existence of just scraping by, barely having enough to eat. And yet the stores of wine and oil remain untouched.

This is describing the situation that we're in now that God has released the Spirit-filled church into the world. There is a choice that every human being has to make.

Do I live apart from that reality and subsist and scrape by, hand-to-mouth, hoping just to break even? Or do I come into the church, the place of anointing, the place where God's people are anointed with the oil of the Holy Spirit?

[13 : 20] Because in the church, at God's table, the Lord's table, there is plenty to go around. There's plenty of wine. There's plenty of subsistence for people who come hungry.

There's a place for you at the table. And so the choice that we're given with this horse is famine or feast. Which will it be? Famine outside on your own or come into the church and feast at the Eucharistic table.

And then, of course, after that, there is a pale horse who comes. The pale horse named, the rider's name is Death and Hades. In chapter 1, we see that the risen Christ holds the keys of Death and Hades.

They are under His control. And the hard truth that we need to face, Christian or not, is that the gospel is not simply a set of propositions, a belief system, a way of making sense of life.

The gospel and how we respond to the gospel is life or death. People who respond by accepting Christ awaken to new life.

[14 : 29] The people who reject Christ and the message of the gospel face only death. It's life or death. And so in all of these ways, these first four seals, the four horsemen, show us that wherever the church proclaims the gospel, wherever the gospel is announced, conflict inevitably follows.

You know, I remember when I first became a Christian when I was 22, I actually thought it would make my life easier. I actually thought it would be easier. I thought, well, now that I have a church, and now that I have Christian friends, and now that I can pray, and now that I am reading the Bible and doing all of this, and now that I know that I belong to God, certainly my life's going to get easier. And it's been the exact opposite. From the moment, I would say from the moment that I became a Christian, my life has been significantly harder. And it's remained harder. It disrupted many of my friendships.

It disrupted my whole plan that I had worked out for my life. It disrupted my sense of identity. It brought an enormous amount of disruption. And anybody who says that when you follow and obey Jesus, that brings peace into your heart is misreading that Bible verse.

Following Jesus is extraordinarily challenging most of the time. It requires painful sacrifice. It makes our life harder. It brings conflict because Jesus doesn't brook competition.

[15 : 56] Jesus brings conflict into our lives because we have to choose. Am I aligned with Him or not? Do I want feast or famine? Do I want to choose resurrection life or death?

That's the kind of conflict that follows the gospel. And there's great opposition outside and within our own hearts to the message of the kingdom because it means our kingdom has to crumble to make way for His.

So the gospel brings conflict, but it doesn't stop there. The next phase of the Christian life cycle is martyrdom. And the fifth seal, as it is cracked open, reveals the souls of martyrs.

And they begin to cry out the souls of the martyrs. And it says that these are people, quote, who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. The martyrs cry out for justice and vindication.

When will you come? When will you bring us justice? And look how God responds. Verse 11, Then they were each given a white robe, or you could translate it stole, white stole, and told to rest a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

[17 : 17] You know what this is saying? Vindication has to wait because there are more martyrs. More people are going to be martyred. And you must wait until everyone who is going to be martyred has been martyred.

Who's this talking about? It's talking about us. It's talking about us. Jesus Himself said in John 12, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. And listen, He was not just talking about Himself. He was talking about His people. He was talking about all of His people.

You know, martyrdom, which means dying for your faith and for your witness, martyrdom is not just one possible fate of Christians.

It is the only possible fate of Christians because to follow Jesus is to walk the road to Calvary. And there is no other way.

[18 : 25] There is no fork in that road. There's one road and it leads to the cross. So that's why He said, if you want to follow Me, you need to count the cost and you need to be willing to take up your cross because I'm going to Calvary.

So it may be, in your life, a physical death. That's not totally out of the question, like the innumerable countless people over the centuries who have been killed for their faith.

Or it may be, as Paul says, living your life as a living sacrifice, a living martyr. It may be the kind of death that the first disciples had to die when they left their job and their friends and their family to follow Jesus wherever He took them.

It could be the kind of death of being disowned by your family because you've become a Christian. Some people in our church have experienced that. It could be the kind of death of giving up the possibility of ever having a family.

Some people in our church have experienced that. It may be the kind of death of losing your social standing or your reputation, which some people in our church have experienced. It may be the

death of passing up a professional opportunity because it would call you to compromise your faith and your values, as some people in our community have experienced.

[19 : 49] But one way or another, the Christian life is a path of martyrdom. And I think perhaps maybe one of our biggest needs as Christians in this country, specifically at this point in history, is to recover a theology of martyrdom.

You know, between our prosperity gospel and our persecution complex, we simply assume that everything should be great, that we should live lives that are largely pain-free.

We're woefully out of touch with the vast majority of Christians who have lived across the centuries when we think that, when we think that that should be normative. I think we've lost sight, perhaps, of what discipleship really means.

You know, it reminds me of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was a martyr. He was hung. And he said, when Christ calls a man or a woman, he bids him come and die.

So if you're a Christian and you're here and your faith feels flat or fruitless or uninspired or empty, if you feel like it's waning, if you're feeling a sense of disconnection from church or from your Christian life and you're just kind of not quite sure what you believe, I want to suggest, and this may not be true, but I want to suggest that the problem may not be intellectual.

[21 : 15] It may not necessarily be the church that you go to. It may not necessarily be anything that you're doing or not doing. The problem could be your self-preservation instinct.

Is it possible that you're trying to have your cake and eat it too? Is it possible that you're trying to buffer yourself against the cost of discipleship? Is it possible that you're that grain of wheat that has not yet fallen to the ground that is safe and not vulnerable and well-protected, but it's alone and it's fruitless?

Is it possible that you need to fall to the ground and die in your faith? Allow yourself to be martyred for Christ. If your faith has not cost you anything, how could it be worth anything to you?

The good news is that the road leads to Calvary, but it doesn't end at Calvary. The road goes through Calvary and it keeps right on going because after martyrdom, the next phase in the Christian life cycle is the glorious resurrection.

And this is what we see during the opening of the sixth seal. At first, it doesn't seem like good news. It seems like the entire world is falling apart.

[22 : 37] The stars are falling out of the sky, earthquakes, the sky being rolled up like a scroll. This is the famous apocalyptic language from Revelation. But we know that even though it seems like the end of the world, it is not the end of the world.

And the reason we know that is because this language exactly parallels Jesus' own teaching. What we heard in our gospel lesson, what we call the Olivet Discourse.

Jesus talks about the stars falling. He talks about wars and rumors of wars. And here's what he says. Verse 6, You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you're not alarmed.

The end is not yet. Verse 8, All of these are but the beginning of the birth pains. He says, It seems like the end of the world.

What's going to happen will seem like the end, but it's not the end. It's the beginning. It's the beginning of something new. And so what seems like the end of the world is simply the end of a world.

[23 : 39] It's the end of the old world order. It's the end of the old way of doing things. It's the end of the old covenant. It's the end of the temple sacrificial system.

The priests, as the author of Hebrews tells us, serving day in and day out, offering sacrifices that never atone for the sin they claim to atone for. The ineffectual way of religion.

That's crumbling to the ground. And of course, in the Olivet Discourse, Jesus is specifically talking about the cataclysmic, earth-shaking event of A.D. 70, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Which, if you were a Jewish person, that was the end of the world. It was the end of everything you knew. That was it. The temple comes crashing down.

Not one stone left on the other. These are all birth pangs, however, because they're signs that God is bringing something new into the world.

[24 : 39] So even though it seems like the end, it's not. And here's what we discover. The angel cries out, do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees. So it seems like everything is going to be swept away and the angel says, stop!

We have to seal the servants of our God. We have to seal them on their foreheads. And then something amazing happens. John hears one thing and then he sees something else. Remember, for those of you who were here last week in chapter 5, John heard the announcement that the conquering lion had arrived and when he turned, what he saw was not a lion but a lamb standing as though it had been slain.

And we are meant to surmise that the lion and the lamb are the same thing. The exact same thing happens here. John hears 144,000 Israelites have been sealed.

Right? That's the complete number from all of the 12 tribes. They've all been sealed. All of Israel is here. So he hears and then he expects that when he turns he's going to see Israelites, old covenant Israelites.

[25 : 47] And then he turns and he looks and what does he see? Not Israelites, not only 144,000, he sees an innumerable multitude of people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

And what are we meant to surmise from this? They're the same thing. Israel, the true Israel, has now gathered. They've been sealed. And it's not just Israelites, it's everybody.

It's people from every country, every language, every tribe, every religious background. They're all here. They're all here. This is the true Israel. The true children of Abraham by faith.

faith. They've all come. And it says of these people that they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

This is an army of martyrs wearing white robes that have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. Anyone who wants to be a part of God's great global family, there's only one thing that matters.

[26 : 50] The old covenant has been done away with. The covenant of works. The covenant of sacrifice. It's been done away with. There's only one thing that matters. Have you been washed by the blood of the Lamb?

Have you been washed by the blood of the Lamb? There was a thread on Reddit recently that got attention and was actually written about in the Washington Post. Somebody posted in D.C., where are good places to cry in D.C.?

And what's interesting and kind of touching is that this was a question just kind of put up there like a lot of things are on a site like Reddit, but it got a lot of very poignant responses.

People actually had a lot of thoughts about the best public places to cry in Washington, D.C. But what, if you began to read the posts, you realize that this got a big response because a lot of people live a lot of their life in this city feeling like they want to cry and needing a place to go where they can cry because people posted about the difficulty and the pressure of living in Washington, D.C.

And a lot of it is connected to the kind of drivenness, the success-oriented meritocracy, the achievement culture where you're only as good as your last accomplishment, where you always feel like everyone around you is smarter and more successful, where you feel like your job doesn't matter, where you feel like you don't matter, where you're constantly having to produce and it's a kind of never-ending hamster wheel of achievement.

[28 : 30] And that makes people want to cry. And so there are a lot of people who cry in parks and in open, empty churches and on street corners and in the basement of Macy's and all kinds of things.

There are people who go and they cry because of the hopelessness of living in such a culture. And what we need to see here is that when the angel opened the sixth seal, when all the world seemed to be crashing down, that was the world that was crumbling.

It's the world that says you were only worth what you can accomplish. It's the world that says you're only worth what you've achieved or what your resume says you're worth. That world came crumbling down. The world of earning and striving and proving ourselves to God, to other people, is no more, not one stone left upon another.

In God's kingdom only one thing matters. Have you been washed in the blood of the Lamb? In our baptismal liturgy we say to kids who have been baptized, we baptized some kids this morning, you've been marked, you've been sealed, you've been sealed with the Holy Spirit and you're marked as one of Christ's own forever.

What we're saying is you will be standing in that great multitude, not because of what you've done but because of what Jesus Christ the Lamb has done for you. And this leads finally to the seventh seal because of course this gives way and gives rise to the seal of worship, the culmination of the Christian life cycle, what it is all for.

[30 : 01] Everything stops in the heavenly worship service, the liturgy pauses and there's this period of silent reflection in chapter 8 on the awe and the grandeur of God and then get this, the prayers of the saints are mingled with incense and they're lifted up before the Lord and this shows us that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, gathers our prayers and brings them into the heavenly throne room before the Lord.

The Spirit, knowing what we know, praying what we need to pray even when we don't know what to pray, that the Spirit intercedes for us, guarantees that our prayers are heard by the Lord.

This is one of the reasons we like to have incense from time to time in our service. It's one of the things this does. It reminds us that as we are gathered here praying and singing and confessing that the Holy Spirit is interceding, that our prayers are being heard, they're going to heaven, right? It's a symbol. And then something even more amazing happens. The censer, all of the prayers, the censer is filled with fire and then that fire in response to the saints' prayers, that fire is cast down on the earth.

God answers the prayer. The prayers of the saints are effectual. They are powerful. The prayer of God's people, when we gather together and when we pray, all hell trembles.

[31 : 26] All hell trembles. The most important thing that we do as God's people, our greatest resource, is prayer.

And when we pray, this shows us we should be bold. Bold in our prayer. We should know that God hears us. We should know the truth of James 5.16.

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. And by the way, Revelation as a whole, this entire book, is about the Lord's prayer being answered.

We pray it every week. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

That's Revelation. God's kingdom coming. God's will being done here as it has eternally been done in the heavenly realm.

[32 : 26] So this is the life cycle of the church. It's the life cycle of every Christian. This is something that is not only enacted throughout history across the centuries, but it's something that we experience in our own walk of faith.

In some of us, it's a cycle that plays out again and again and again. It begins with victory. The victory that Jesus Christ has accomplished and our willingness to accept that.

It leads to conflict. It leads to the kind of conflict that forces us to choose where our loyalties really lie.

That gives way to the call for martyrdom. It's not enough just to acknowledge Jesus. He calls us to Calvary to be that grain that falls to the ground and dies so that it can bear much fruit.

Ultimately, martyrdom is not the end. We have the resurrection promise. Out of death, God brings resurrection life, renewal, and then that new life produces worship and effectual prayer.

[33 : 32] This is the shape that Jesus' ministry takes and it's the shape that His church in her ministry will take and it's the shape that our lives in our ministry will take.

So it's worth asking yourself as we prepare to move on in our service, where do you find yourself in this cycle? If you're somebody who's here and you're not sure what you believe, you wouldn't consider yourself to be a Christian, perhaps you're considering whether or not this is a victory that has been accomplished on your behalf.

That Jesus Christ has overcome sin and death and desires to overcome sin and death in your life. Maybe you're a Christian but you're facing massive conflict.

Don't think that God has abandoned you. Don't think that God doesn't hear your prayer. Don't think that all of this is for naught. If you're experiencing conflict as a Christian, it means you're right where you belong.

This is exactly what the story tells us is going to happen. That's what it means. That's all it means. Are you in a place of martyrdom where God is trying to put something in your life to death?

[34 : 39] He's trying to kill something in your life. Are you holding on to it, protecting it, or will you let him take it? Because one of the things that we recognize as we see this story unfold, here's what the story shows us.

We all want resurrection life. We all want effectual prayer. We all want authentic worship. We all want the joy that comes with that. But resurrection life and worship, effectual prayer, those are things that are only found on the far side of conflict and martyrdom.

That's the road that we're called to walk. Let's pray. Amen. Let's pray.