

The seven seals

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[0 : 00] Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, Come, 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.

When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, Come, and out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, Come, and I looked, and behold, a black horse, and its rider had a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine.

When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the fourth living creature say, Come, and I looked, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him.

And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth. When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.

[1 : 27] They cried out with a loud voice, O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? Then they were each given a white robe 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.

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth. The full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.

The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains.

Calling to the mountains and rocks, fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb. For the great day of the wrath has come, and who can stand?

Thank you very much for that, Wilson. Before I begin, I think I'd like to pray for us before we go any further. So Heavenly Father, I just want to thank you for the time we have together this morning.

[2 : 49] I just pray we'll be receptive, and despite where we are, wherever we are in the world, that we'll listen to your word and apply it to our lives. Amen. Okay, one moment. Let me get ready.

You should have, as well, if you look to the chat, you can see the service outline, so you can follow, hopefully, what I'm about to say. So I'll begin now by saying, I demand to speak to the manager at once.

The head teacher will hear of this, mark my words. I'm going to tell Dad. I'm hoping these all sound familiar. I'm also hoping these examples shed some light on an issue that we deal with in our lives regularly.

Behind each of these statements, in our culture at least, there's an accepted understanding. Someone is ultimately in charge. By that I mean in control.

Someone who has the final say, and the person who has the responsibility. As Christians, we're often confronted with the following questions.

[3 : 54] With the world the way it is, how can you say that Jesus is really in charge? With so much suffering in the world, how can you reconcile that God is in control and he allows all of this to happen?

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Warren. I'm a member of the church family here at Grace Church Dulwich. It was an honour to be asked by Simon if I'd like to give my first talk at church, what is seen by many as one of the most difficult books and indeed passages in the Bible to understand.

It's quite common to hear of Christians choosing to stay well clear of the book of Revelation. But bear this in mind. Revelation is the only book in the Bible where we're told we'll be blessed by reading the word of prophecy or reading it aloud, a little fun fact to take away.

In fact, I would say it's because of the rich imagery and descriptive language that we can come away with a renewed confidence and certainty. Chapter 6 helps us to see that our Heavenly Father is fully in control of world history.

If the book of Revelation can be summed up in a news headline, it would be God wins. In Genesis, humankind begins in the Garden of Eden. Revelation points to a time when creation returns to an even better garden.

[5 : 18] I think it would be very helpful if you break chapter 6 into three sections today for us to study. And those sections are what John sees happening on earth, what John sees happening in heaven, and then the climax of history.

Before getting into our three sections of studying chapter 6, I think we should remember chapters 4 and 5 that Jake and Michael shared with us over the last few weeks. We know that although this book was written most probably by the Apostle John on the island of Patmos 2,000 years ago, it was written firstly for seven relatively new churches in what we now know as modern Turkey.

In the previous two chapters, we were introduced to a series of characters in the visions that are seen by John. In chapter 5, alongside our Heavenly Father, we were introduced to the Lamb, the Sealed Scroll, four living creatures, and 24 elders.

But the most important thing here to remember is the significance of these chapters. In chapter 4, we learn that our Heavenly Father is on the throne. In chapter 5, that Jesus is the only person in history seen as worthy enough to be granted authority to open the Sealed Scroll, a scroll which represents world history.

If you haven't managed to hear those sermons yet, you can find them on YouTube or through the Grace Church Dulwich social media channels. Chapter 6, what we're studying today, is about the rest of history and its culmination.

[6 : 47] So firstly, we need to understand that the visions that John sees are about events that happen on Earth. It's about humankind. It's about us.

We know the world we live in is broken and unfair, unjust. John is describing world history and what it will be like until Jesus returns. The picture John is painting may seem difficult to comprehend, but we should remember that John is using language to make sense of heavenly visions, which may be beyond description in language as he knew it.

After all, we know that from chapter 4, verse 2, John is in the Spirit and was observing his vision from heaven. In chapter 6, verse 1, John says that he watched the Lamb opening one of the seven seals on the scroll.

When we think of the Lamb, that's imagery that we're used to associating with Jesus. In the New Testament, when John the Baptist first meets Jesus in John 1, verse 29, he explained, Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

So John the Baptist physically saw Jesus, but still decided to use that descriptive language to describe that event. And the use of the term the Lamb has its roots in several Old Testament scriptures and events, including the Passover.

[8 : 09] Now, in the same way that perhaps Monty Python and Alan Partridge quips and visual cues could be second nature to men and women of a certain age in Dulwich, almost certainly sentences that John used would have transported the readers of his letter and listeners to passages from the Old Testament books of Ezekiel, Isaiah and Zechariah.

What happens next is probably more familiar. I'm willing to make a bet that if you asked a member of the public in Herne Hill or Dulwich about the four horsemen of the apocalypse, they'd probably have some understanding of what you were talking about.

I'd also bet they say that the four horsemen generally equate to bad news. The four horsemen featured in the book of Revelation have been part of our popular culture for thousands of years.

They're represented in our literature, our arts and our music. I think this in itself shows us that Christians see their appearance as being significant. So from the vantage point of heaven in chapter 6, verse 2, the Apostle John says, 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.

And after that he sees a red horseman, a black horseman, and then a pale horseman, although it could probably be translated as slightly green too. There's an awful lot that's been written about what these horses and their riders represent.

[9 : 36] What is clear for us to see plainly is the links between how the horses and their riders are described and how they came to appear. All four of the horses and riders are told to come by each of the living creatures who are surrounding the Heavenly Father's throne.

All four of the horses and riders are given permission or an order. Someone else is telling them what they're allowed to do and what they aren't. They have a degree of authority.

As we've seen, the first horseman in white is permitted to be a conqueror. And in verse 2, the first horseman is given a crown. The second horseman in red, permitted to take peace from earth.

We see that in verse 4. The black horseman, the third, permitted to enforce a degree of scarcity or famine. You'll see in verse 5 that he's holding scales, perhaps representing being in charge of justice.

And the fourth horseman, the pale rider, has the name Death and was followed by Hades. In verse 8, John says, And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and with beasts of the earth.

[10 : 46] So from the vantage point of heaven in his vision, John is seeing utter destruction taking place. He's seeing famine. He's seeing wars.

He's seeing communities turning on each other. Does any of this sound familiar? I think it does because there are moments, events, trends, time periods that have marked human history like this since the fall.

Since sin entered the world, many of these things have become almost normalised. We know the world isn't the way it should be. Christians have an answer as to why, but a cause is not shared by everyone.

The question then is, how can this be allowed to happen? Why is Jesus not acting if he's in charge? He's opening the seals, after all. And the opening of the fifth seal begins to provide us with an answer.

And that answer comes from looking to heaven. Let's look at chapter 6 from verses 9 to 11. When he, that's the Lamb, opens the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and the witness they had borne.

[11 : 55] They cried out with a loud voice, O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? Then they were each given a white robe 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.

John here is talking specifically about justice and talking in particular to the church. You'll notice in verse 11 that the martyrs are each given a white robe, symbolising their ultimate victory.

We said before that God wins. Here's another marker to show that this is guaranteed. The persecuted church is central to this particular vision, which is looking toward heaven in contrast to the first four seals that were looking towards earth.

Persecution was definitely happening at the time when John wrote about his vision. And as for now, persecution may not be as prevalent or obvious in the UK, but it almost certainly is in other parts of the world.

And that's been true throughout church history. The key thing that John is communicating is that the battle continues. A few weeks ago, Jake used the helpful analogy of John being summoned to the Supreme Headquarters to view the ongoing battle that our Heavenly Father is waging on sin.

[13 : 19] John can see the various stages of the different battles. He can see that victory has already been achieved. He can see past battles and also the continuing futile skirmishes. These martyrs in heaven are crying out not for vengeance, but for justice for their fellow Christians.

Now I ask, isn't that something we all want? I said a few moments ago that the battle continues. Earlier this year, five million Christians marched in Nigeria to protest against the beheading of a pastor at the hands of the militant Islamic group Boko Haram.

That's over half of London's population marching for a Christian cause on just one day. Now, here's a thought experiment for you.

If you could end human history right now, would you do it? If you're a Christian, the good news for you, and this is just a thought experiment, remember, is the world would be made perfect and you'd be able to enjoy it.

A world liberated from sin, with us, God's creation, being able to be in proper relationship with him forever. But what about your family who aren't Christians?

[14 : 30] What about your work colleagues that you plan to invite to the Christmas service this year, or to Christianity Explored? What about all the other people you hope to tell the good news to, and pray for the Holy Spirit to do the rest?

Their time is up, and they wouldn't be joining you. Would you still do it? In 1 Corinthians 4, verse 5, we're told, Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the new things now hidden in darkness, and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

Then each one will receive his commendation from God. It is God's place to judge, not ours. Perhaps waiting a while longer, although painful, seems fairer to us now.

But when it comes, what does the end of the world look like? What is clear is the battle was raging in the past. It's raging now, and it's building towards a climax.

Let's explore more here. When the Lamb opened the sixth seal, John's vision continued. He saw a great earthquake. The sun stopped shining. The full moon became like blood.

[15 : 46] The stars of the sky falling like fig trees, shedding their fruit. It's vivid and arresting, but let's remember, this is a vision. Again, the imagery harks back to the Old Testament, this time in Zephaniah 1 and Joel 2.

Of course, we know that the stars in the sky are physically much bigger than Earth, and would obviously engulf us if this were physically to happen. This is bombastic language. I'm not sure about you, but I think it sounds frightening.

And if we look again from verse 15, the people who are in this vision are frightened too. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful and everyone slave and free hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.

For the great day of their wrath has come. And who can stand? There's something else to notice here in verse 16. Even at the time when the world is collapsing before them, these individuals are trying to find rest elsewhere and not in Jesus.

So we're faced with a question. Who can stand at the end? As Christians, we know the answer. And you can see in Romans 5 verse 1. Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

[17 : 18] Despite having power, authority, their standing, their position in society, there's no hiding place for people who don't know Jesus as their saviour.

Jesus' justice and authority is total. Some of you will be familiar with the theologian Michael Wilcock. In his book on Revelation, he draws parallels between chapter 6 of Revelation and Matthew 24.

In that chapter of Matthew, he spots how Jesus' words there mirror the vision that John later has. And of course, it is Jesus, the Lamb, who is opening the scroll.

Jesus speaks to us on both occasions about his authority and justice. And the message is the same. I'm sure you've all noticed as we reach the end of the chapter, you'll see that the seventh seal hasn't been opened.

And John has yet to describe that vision to us. Next week, we'll hear more about what the opening of the final seal means for the church in chapter 7. But what does this all mean to us today?

[18 : 26] We need to look back at chapters 2 to 5 and remember who John initially wrote this book for. Those seven different churches that John was writing to, their Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Theotera, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea each had a number of problems that John was addressing and which he was warning them about.

He warned them they shouldn't compromise in the gospel by altering doctrine. He encouraged them in their faith, even though he knew that they would face opposition and persecution with a huge price to pay.

He warned them not to be sleeping, to pay attention to the word of God and not compromise to be part of the world. I would say that all of these can still apply to us too.

We should take the vision that John sees in chapter 6 as confirmation that Jesus is in charge, not that he isn't. Chapters 4 and 5 help to set the scene for the end of history.

And it's a history that Jesus is in control of. We can see the signs of evil and destruction in the world, however painful they are, that justice will come.

[19 : 37] The church will be vindicated. And we can take the fact that it's Jesus who decides when the end will come. They will still have time to share the good news before.

Let's see you later.