

## The Seals And The Sealed Revelation 6—7

The worship described in **Revelation 4—5** is preparation for the wrath described in **Revelation 6—19**. It seems strange to us that worship and judgment should go together, but this is because we do not fully understand either the holiness of God or the sinfulness of man. Nor do we grasp the total picture of what God wants to accomplish and how the forces of evil have opposed Him. God is longsuffering, but eventually He must judge sin and vindicate His servants.

According to **Daniel 9**, seven years are assigned to Israel in God's prophetic calendar, beginning with the signing of an agreement with the world dictator (the Antichrist), and ending with Christ's return to earth to judge evil and establish His kingdom. It is this period that is described in **Revelation 6—19**. By referring to John's outline (**Rev. 1**), you will see that his description is in three parts: the first three and a half years (**Rev. 6—9**), the events at the middle of the period (**Rev. 10—14**), and the last three and a half years (**Rev. 15—19**).

What is so significant about the middle of the tribulation? That is when the Antichrist breaks his covenant with Israel and becomes their persecutor instead of their protector (**Dan. 9:27**).

- As you study these fourteen action-filled chapters, keep in mind that John wrote to encourage God's people in every age of history. He was not only writing *prophecy* that would be fulfilled in the end times, but he was also writing great *theology* and dramatically revealing the character of God and the principles of His kingdom.
- These chapters describe the cosmic conflict between God and Satan, the New Jerusalem and Babylon, and no matter what "key" a student may use to unlock Revelation, he cannot help but see the exalted King of Kings as He vindicates his people and gives victory to His overcomers.
- Since the church never knows when Christ will return, each generation must live in expectancy of His coming. Therefore, the book of Revelation must be able to communicate truth to each generation, not just to the people who will be alive when these events occur.
- Verses like **Revelation 13:9**, **16:15** and **22:7**, **18-20** all indicate the timelessness of John's message. This also explains why the apostle used so much symbolism, for symbols never lose their meaning. In every era of its history, the church has had to

content with Babylon (compare **Rev. 18:4** with **Jer. 50-51**) and Antichrist (see **1 John 2:18ff**). Revelation **6—19** is merely the climax of this conflict.

In **Revelation 6—7**, John characterized the opening days of the tribulation as a time of retribution, response, and redemption.

### 1. Retribution (6:1-8)

In this section, John recorded the opening of the first four seals, and as each seal was opened, one of the four living creatures summoned a rider on a horse. (“Come and see” should read, “Come!”) In other words, events take place on earth because of the sovereign direction of God in heaven.

The horse imagery is probably related to the vision described in **Zechariah 1:7-17**. Horses represent God’s activity on earth, the forces he uses to accomplish His divine purposes. The center of His program is Israel, particularly the city of Jerusalem. (Jerusalem is mentioned thirty-nine times in Zechariah). God has a covenant purpose for Israel, and that purpose will be fulfilled just as He promised.

Now, Let’s try to identify these horses and their riders.

- a. **Antichrist (vv. 1-2)**. Daniel states that there is a “prince that shall come,” who will make a covenant with Israel to protect her from her enemies (**Dan. 9:26-27**). In other words, the future dictator begins his career as a peacemaker! He will go from victory to victory and finally control the whole world.
  - i. Some have suggested that the rider on the white horse is actually a symbol of the “conquering Christ”. Who today is defeating the forces of evil in the world. They point to **Revelation 19:11** as proof, but the only similarity is the presence of a white horse. If this rider is indeed Jesus Christ, it seems strange that He should be named *at the end of the book* and not at the beginning!
  - ii. We should expect the Antichrist to resemble the Christ, because the Antichrist is Satan’s great imitation! Even the Jews (who ought to know the Scriptures) will be deceived by him (**John 5:43; 2 Thess. 2:1-12**). This great deceiver will come as a perfect leader, holding a bow but no arrows! Our Lord’s weapon is a sword (**Rev. 19:15**).
  - iii. The word for *crown* in **Revelation 6:2** is *stephanos*, which means “the victor’s crown.” The crown that Jesus Christ wears is *diadema*, “the kingly crown” (**Rev. 19:12**). The Antichrist could never wear a diadema, because it belongs only to the Son of God.

Certainly, there is a sense in which Jesus Christ is conquering today, as He releases people from the bondage of sin and Satan (**Acts 26:18; Col. 1:13**). But this conquest began with His victory on the cross and certainly did not have to wait for the opening of a seal! We shall note later that the sequence of events in **Revelation 6** closely parallels the sequence given by our Lord in his Olivet discourse, and the first item mentioned in the appearance of the false Christs (**Matt. 24:5**).

- b. **War (vv. 3-4)**. The Antichrist's conquest begins in peace, but soon he exchanges the empty bow for a sword. The color red is often associated with terror and death: the red dragon (**Rev. 12:3**), the red beast (**Rev. 17:3**). It is a picture of wanton bloodshed. War has been a part of man's experience since Cain killed Abel, so this image would speak to believers in every age, reminding them that God is ultimately in control, even though he is not responsible for the lawless deeds of men and nations.
- c. **Famine (vv. 5-6)**. The color black is often connected with famine (**Jer. 14:1-2; Lam. 5:10**). Famine and war go together. A shortage of food will always drive up prices and force the government to ration what is available. "To eat bread by weight" is a Jewish phrase indicating that food is scarce (**Lev. 26:26**).
  - i. A penny (denarius) a day was a standard wage for laborers (**Matt. 20:2**), but, of course, it had much greater buying power than the common penny does today. A "measure" of wheat was about two pints, sufficient for the daily needs of one person. Ordinarily, a person could buy eight to twelve measures for a penny, and much more barley, which was a cheaper grain.
  - ii. However, during the tribulation, a man will have to work all day just to secure food for himself! There will be nothing for his family! At the same time, the rich will be enjoying plenty of oil and wine. No wonder the Antichrist will eventually be able to control the economy (**Rev. 13:17**) as he promises to feed the hungry masses.
- d. **Death (vv. 7-8)**. John saw two personages: Death riding a pale horse and hades (the realm of the dead) following him. Christ has the keys of death and hades (**Rev. 1:18**), and both will one day be cast into hell (**Rev. 20:14**). Death claims the body while hades claims the soul of the dead (**Rev. 20:13**). John saw these enemies going forth to claim their prey, armed with weapons of the sword, hunger, pestilence (death), and wild beasts.
  - i. In ancient times, hunger, pestilence, and the ravages of beast would be expected to accompany war (note **Jer. 15:2, 24:10; Ezek. 14:21**).

Conquering tyrants who bring the world war, famine, and pestilence are certainly nothing new. Suffering people from the days of the Roman Empire to the most recent war can easily recognize anticipations of these four dreaded horsemen. This why the book of Revelation has been a source of encouragement to suffering believers throughout history. As they see the

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Lamb opening the seals, they realize that God is in control and that His purposes will be accomplished.

## 2. Response (6:9-17)

John recorded two responses to the opening of the seals, one in heaven and the other on earth.

- 1) **The martyrs (vv. 9-11).** When the Old testament priest presented an animal sacrifice, the victim's blood was poured out at the base of the brazened altar (**Lev. 4:7, 18, 25, 30**). In Old Testament imagery, blood represents life (**Lev. 17:11**). So, here in Revelation, the souls of the martyrs "under the altar" indicates that their lives were given sacrificially to the glory of God.
  - a. The Greek word *martus*, which gives us our English word martyr, simply means "a witness" (see **Rev. 2:13, 17:6**). These saints were slain by the enemy because of their witness to the truth of God and the message of Jesus Christ.
  - b. The forces of the Antichrist do not accept the truth, because Satan wants them to be deceived and accept his lies (see **Rev. 19:20, 20:10**; also **2 Thess. 2:9-12**).
  - c. Since their murderers are still alive on earth, these martyrs are apparently from the early part of the tribulation. But they represent all those that have laid down their lives for Jesus Christ and cause of God's truth, and they are an encouragement for all today who may be called to follow them.
  - d. The great question, however, was not whether their enemies would be judged, but when. "How long, O Lord?" has been the cry of God's suffering people throughout the ages. The saints in heaven know that God will eventually judge sin and establish righteousness in the earth, but they do not know God's exact schedule.
  - e. It is not personal revenge that they seek, but vindication of God's holiness and the establishment of God's justice. Every believer today who sincerely prays, "Thy kingdom come!" is echoing their petition.

Many others would be slain for their faith before the Lord would return and establish His kingdom (**Rev. 11:7, 12:11, 14:13 and 20:4-5**). Then as today, it appears that the enemy is winning, but God will have the last word.

- 2) **The earth-dwellers (vv. 12-17).** The martyrs cried, "Avenge us!" but the unbelievers on earth will cry, "Hide us!" The opening of the sixth seal will produce

worldwide convulsions and catastrophes, including the first of three great earthquakes (**Rev. 6:12, 11:13, 16:18-19**). All of nature will be affected: the sun, moon, and stars, as well as the heavens, the mountains, and the islands. Compare this scene with **Joel 2:30-31** and **3:15** as well as **Isaiah 13:9-10** and **34:2-4**.

- a. Even though John wrote using symbolic language, these verses describe a scene that would frighten even the most courageous person. People will try to hide from the face of God and from the face of the Lamb!
- b. We will see more of “the wrath of God” as we progress through Revelation (**Rev. 11:18, 14:10, 16:19, 19:15**). We will also encounter the wrath of Satan (**Rev. 12:17**) and the wrath of the nations as they oppose God (**Rev. 11:18**).
- c. If men and women will not yield to the love of God and be changed by the grace of God, then there is no way for them to escape the wrath of God.
- d. Rank and wealth will not deliver anyone in that terrible day. John’s list included kings, captains, and slaves, the rich and the poor.
- e. The phrase “wrath of the Lamb” seems a paradox. “Wrath of the lion” would be more consistent. We are so accustomed to emphasizing the meekness and gentleness of Christ (**Matt. 11:28-30**) that we forget His holiness and justice. The same Christ who welcomed the children also drove the merchants from the temple.
- f. God’s wrath is not like a child’s temper tantrum or punishment meted out by an impatient parent. God’s wrath is the evidence of His holy love for all that is right and His holy hatred for all that is evil.
- g. Furthermore, the people mentioned here are *impenitent*. They refuse to submit to God’s will. They would rather hide from God in fear (remember Adam and Eve?) than run to Him in faith.

But is there any hope for believers during this terrible time of judgment? And what about God’s special people, the Jews, who made a covenant with the Antichrist? Certainly, people will trust the Lord even after the church is taken to heaven, but how will they manage? We turn to **Revelation 7** for some of the answers.

But before considering John’s third theme in this section (redemption) we must note the parallels that exist between Christ’s prophetic words recorded in **Matthew 24** and what John wrote in **Revelation 6**. The following summary outline makes this clear.

Matthew 24	Revelation 6
False Christs (vv. 4-5)	White horse rider (vv. 1-2)
Wars (v. 6)	Red horse—war (vv. 3-4)
Famines (v. 7a)	Black horse—famine (vv. 5-6)
Death (vv. 7b-8)	Pale horse—death (vv. 7-8)
Martyrs (v. 9)	Martyrs under the altar (vv. 9-11)
Worldwide chaos (vv. 10-13)	Worldwide chaos (vv. 12-17)

**Matthew 24:14** introduces the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom throughout the whole world, and this may well be where **Revelation 7** fits in. God may use the sealed 144,000 Jews to share His Word with the world, resulting in the salvation of multitudes.

### 3. Redemption (7:1-17)

It is important that we contrast the two groups of people described in this chapter.

7:1-8	7:9-17
Jews	Gentiles from all nations
Numbered—144,000	Not numbered, nor could be
Sealed on the earth	Standing in heaven before God

While we are not told explicitly in Scripture that the 144,000 Jews are God's witnesses, and that the Gentiles host is saved through their ministry, this appears to be a logical deduction; otherwise, why are they associated in this chapter? The parallel with **Matthew 24:14** also indicates that the 144,000 will witness for the Lord during the tribulation.

- h. **The sealed Jews (vv. 1-8).** Angels are associated with the forces of nature: the wind (**Rev. 7:1**), fire (**Rev. 14:18**), and water (**Rev. 16:5**). Stopping the winds implies a "lull before the storm." God controls all of nature. During the day of His wrath, He will use the forces of nature to judge mankind. The phrase "four corners of the earth" is no more "unscientific" here than it is in **Isaiah 11:12** or the daily newspaper.
  - i. In Scripture, a seal indicates ownership and protection. Today, God's people are sealed with the Holy Spirit (**Eph. 1:13-14**). This is God's guarantee that we are saved and safe, and that He will one day take us to heaven.
  - ii. The 144,000 Jews will receive the Father's name as their seal (**Rev. 14:1**), in contrast to the "mark of the beast" that the Antichrist will give those who follow him (**Rev. 13:17, 14:11, 16:2, 19:20**).

- iii. The seal will protect these chosen Jews from the judgments that will “hurt the earth and the sea” (**Rev. 7:2**), and occur when the first four angels blow their trumpets (**Rev. 8**). The judgments are intensified when the horrible locusts are released from the pit (**Rev. 9:1-4**).
- iv. In every age, God has had His faithful remnant. Elijah thought he was alone, but God had 7,000 who were yet faithful to Him (**1 Kings 19:18**). The sealing described in **Revelation 7** certainly has its background in **Ezekiel 9:1-7**, where the faithful were sealed before God’s judgment fell.
- v. The number 144,000 is significant because it signifies perfection and completeness (144=12x12). *Some* see here the completeness of all God’s people: the twelve tribes of Israel (Old Testament saints) and the twelve apostles (New Testament saints). This may be a good application of this passage, but it is not the basic interpretation, for we are told that these 144,000 are all Jews, and even their tribes are named.
  - i. **The saved Gentiles (vv. 9-17)**. You cannot read the book of Revelation without developing a global outlook, for the emphasis is on what God does for people in the whole world. The Lamb died to redeem people “out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (**Rev. 5:9**). The great multitudes pictured here came from “all nations, and kindreds, and people and tongues” (**Rev. 7:9**). “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” was our Lord’s mandate (**Mark 16:15**).
  - j. There is no doubt as to who this multitude is, because one of the elders explained it to John (**Rev. 7:14**): They are Gentiles who have been saved through faith in Christ during the tribulation. (We will meet this same group again in **Revelation 14**.)
  - k. While today, in most parts of the world, it is relatively easy to confess Christ, this will not be the case during the tribulation, at least during the last half of it. Then, unless persons wear the “mark of the beast,” they will not be able to buy or sell, and this would leave them without even life’s bare necessities. **Revelation 7:16** indicates that they suffered hunger, thirst, and lack of shelter.
  - l. The fact that they are standing before the throne and not seated around it indicates that these people are not identified with the twenty-four elders. In fact, John himself did not know who they were! That the elder had to tell John who they were suggests that they are a special people.

Of course, in the heavenly city (**Rev. 21—22**), all distinctions will cease and we shall all simply be the people of God in glory. But while God is working out His program in human history, distinctions still exist between the Jews, the Gentiles, the church, and the tribulation saints.

John gave a beautiful description of these people.

1. They were *accepted*, for they stood before God's throne and the Lamb. No doubt they had been rejected on earth, for they stood for truth at a time when lies were popular and Satan was in charge. Their white robes and palms symbolize victory.
2. Then, they were *joyful*. They sang praises to the Father and to the Lamb, and their worship was joined by all those who surround the throne.
3. They were *rewarded*. They had the privilege of being before God's throne and of serving Him. When God's people get to heaven there will be work to do! We shall be able to serve Him perfectly! The Lamb will shepherd us and satisfy us with every good thing (see **Isa. 49:10; Rev. 21:4**).

The opening of the seventh seal will introduce the seven "trumpet judgments" (**Rev. 8—11**) and the wrath of God will increase both in intensity and scope. But before that occurs, we are assured that in His wrath, God will remember mercy (**Hab. 3:2**). Despite the wrath of God and the terror inspired by Satan and his helpers, multitudes will be saved through the blood of Jesus Christ. No matter what the age or dispensation, God's way of salvation has always been the same: faith in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.

Sad to say, however, multitudes during that time will also reject the Savior and trust "the beast." But are there not people today who prefer Satan to Christ and this world to the world to come? They are just as condemned as the tribulation sinners who receive the "mark of the beast."

If you have never trusted the Savior, do so now.

If you have trusted Him, then share the good news of salvation with others that they might be delivered from the wrath to come.

**Homework: Blow The Trumpets! Read Revelation 8—9.**