

Seven Seals

According to the theory of plate tectonics, the earth's crust is made up of massive plates of solid, dense materials about 100 kilometres thick and of varying sizes, from the huge Pacific plate which underlies most of the Pacific Ocean, to the many smaller plates, such as Juan de Fuca just to the west of Vancouver Island, Washington and Oregon. These plates move, in theory, because they are resting on the underlying asthenosphere which is less strong and dense. It is therefore possible for some plates to be gradually forced into the earth's crust at the points where they run up against other plates. The process is very slow, with the typical 10-40 mm/year growth of the Mid-Atlantic range being about as fast as your fingernails grow. The Nazca plate, off the west coast of South America, moves about as fast as your hair grows.

In the meantime, these plates grind against each other. There are many theories about why these plates move, whether heat transfer, gravitational pull, energy transfer between the different layers, earth's rotation - there is nothing settled in the debate - but what scientists agree on is that there is massive friction along the fault lines that separate these plates, a friction that results in earthquakes and volcanic eruptions and less obvious, very gradual movements on the earth's surface. For example, Mt. Everest is thought to grow by about 4 mm per year, but may have dropped as much as a whole inch during the Nepal earthquake earlier this year.

Why all the discussion of plate tectonics? Because this slow, grinding force, this battle for dominance, is a picture of the Greek word *thlipsis*, a word that is translated in the English New Testament by the word "tribulation". What has happened that has caused this friction in the world? Jesus came to earth and announced that the Kingdom of God was here, right among the people of Galilee and Judea. The presence of the Kingdom of God meant that there was a threat to the kingdoms of this world, a tension, opposition.

This word *thlipsis* describes this tension that is brought into the world by the presence of God's kingdom, and it gives us a picture of the relentless pressure that results as the world fights back, as the devil pushes against the believers and seeks to undermine their message and their faith. This is what happened in the book that we have been studying and we'll witness this process as we begin to look at chapter 6.

As I watched the Lamb broke the first of the seven seals on the scroll. Then one of the four living beings called out with a voice that sounded like thunder, "Come!" I looked up, and saw a white horse! Its rider carried a bow, and a crown was placed on his head. He rode out to win many battles and gain the victory. (6:1,2)

We're coming into a section commonly known as "The four horsemen of the apocalypse". You'll remember from last week that there was some real anxiety created when it looked like no one would be found to break the seals and allow the revelation of God's plan in history to be known. But the Lamb who looked like He had been killed, was found worthy and so, as we begin this next chapter, it is He who

breaks the seals. It is not Jesus who rides the white horse in chapter 6, because this rider is one of four who bring violence and destruction to the earth and that is not Jesus' purpose. In chapter 19, we'll encounter Jesus riding a white horse, but He is clearly identified as "King of kings and Lord of lords" -- this one is not identified.

When the Lamb broke the second seal, I heard the second living being say, "Come!" And another horse appeared, a red one. Its rider was given a mighty sword and the authority to remove peace from the earth. And there was war and slaughter everywhere. (vv. 3,4)

When the Lamb broke the third seal, I heard the third living being say, "Come!" And I looked up and saw a black horse, and its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. And a voice from among the four living beings said, "A loaf of wheat bread or three loaves of barley for a day's pay. And don't waste the olive oil and wine." (vv. 5,6)

The colour red represents blood, and the second rider was given authority to remove peace, which led to a lot of blood being spilled in conflicts all over the earth. The color black represents famine and the rider of the black horse is holding scales, also an indication of famine in the earth as scales would be used to ration out the limited supply of food. The warning that a loaf of wheat bread or three loaves of barley will take up a day's wages suggests that the price will go up dramatically, 10 or 12 times as much as normal, and that most of a family's income will go to feeding themselves.

And when the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the fourth living being say, "Come!" And I looked up and saw a horse whose color was pale green like a corpse. And Death was the name of its rider, who was followed around by the Grave (literally, by Hades). They were given authority over one-fourth of the earth, to kill with the sword and famine and disease and wild animals. (vv. 7,8)

With every seal that is broken, one of the four creatures that surround the throne of God says, "Come!" Who is being asked to come? It's not John, who has already come near and is seeing and recording the vision. One could quickly conclude that they are calling for the four horsemen to come, but why would the creatures who worship God call on the forces of evil? The most helpful way of looking at this scene is to understand that the four living creatures are calling for the Kingdom to come.

Unfortunately, when the Kingdom of God breaks into the world, the world reacts. The devil wants to keep his turf and will raise up forces to react against the kingdom. This reaction, this Satan-inspired rebellion against God and His rule on the earth, is portrayed in the actions of the four horsemen who bring deception and conflict (the white horse), war (the red horse), famine (the black horse) and death (the pale horse).

Notice that the number of horsemen is four, the biblical number that represents creation. The significance in this case is that God has a reasonable right to exercise His authority over His own creation, but created beings have rebelled against Him and invited His judgment. These four are not limited to any specific time in human history.

In fact, it would be fair to say that the past nearly 2000 years since Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom had come have seen an abundant share of deception and conflict, war, famine and death -- this is the result of human rebellion against God's rule. The twentieth century began with angry young Turks murdering 1.5 million Armenians while the rest of the world watched without protest. It is estimated that during the final decade of the twentieth century, about 6 million people died as a direct or indirect result of war, including 1.5 million in Sudan, over 1 million in Afghanistan and at least half a million in Rwanda. John's revelation tells us that this violence is one result of the people of the earth rebelling against God's righteous rule over His creation.

And when the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of all who had been martyred for the word of God and for being faithful in their witness. They called loudly to the Lord and said, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before You judge the people who belong to this world for what they have done to us? When will You avenge our blood against these people?" Then a white robe was given to each of them. And they were told to rest a little longer until the full number of the servants of Jesus had been martyred. (vv. 9-11)

Why were the souls of the martyrs "under the altar"? In the tabernacle, and later in the temple, the place under the altar was where the blood of the sacrifices collected. The souls of the martyrs take on a kind of sacrificial role, helping to put an end to the violence and injustice in the world. A graphic illustration of this is found in the history of missions on the African continent where Christian missionaries would pack their belongings for the journey to Africa in wooden boxes shaped like coffins. They didn't expect to survive and many of them died, usually from tropical diseases. There is a line across Africa today which resists the spread of Islam and it marks the northern advance of those missionaries who were willing to sacrifice their lives for the cause of Christ. Another example is the number of new converts in both Southern Sudan and in Iran today which have come about because of the way Christians gave up their lives; with hope, with peace, with praises to their God still on their lips.

These voices in Revelation are calling for God to judge the world - they want justice, even vengeance, on those who have killed them. And they are told to be patient. There is more violence to come, not because God produces it, but because His Kingdom has come and because those who resist it will resort to violence. This clash of kingdoms does not seem to work out well for those who are following the Prince of Peace, who desire to demonstrate love rather than hatred, but God uses the sacrifice of believers to advance the Kingdom of love and to overcome evil. Things are not as they seem.

The breaking of the sixth seal is followed by an earthquake, the sun is darkened, the moon becomes red as blood, the stars fall and the sky is rolled up like a scroll. These images are taken from the Old Testament and refer to the overthrow of earthly kingdoms, to dramatic events that result from political and social upheaval. One example, from Isaiah 13:10, where the prophet, speaking for the LORD God, says:

The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light; the rising

sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.

The rest of chapter 13 shows that this is clearly referring to God's judgment on Babylon. It mentions the Medes as being God's instruments of judgment, and they conquered Babylon in the sixth century BC and paved the way for the people of Judah to return to their homeland. Here in Revelation, we also find a picture of divine judgment as the people of the earth cry out to the mountains and the rocks to cover them and to hide them from the face of God. What a picture! The saints cry out to God for justice while the people of the earth ask to be hidden from God's presence. It's not that they don't believe, it's that they reject God's authority and lordship. "Hide us! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who will be able to survive?" (6:17)

Before the seventh seal is broken, four angels appear standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds. Again, the number four has to do with creation and these angels represent a form of judgment that will impact creation. Before they are allowed to fulfill their role, 144,000 people are marked with the seal of God for their protection. This number is clearly symbolic. There are not exactly 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes who will be found worthy of God's protection, but 12 times 12, or 144, is a way of describing the Israel of God, His people, whether Jews or Gentiles. When you multiply that number by 10, it means "a big number". When you multiply by 10 times 10, it means "a really big number". And when you multiply by 10 times 10 times 10, it means "a number so big it is beyond counting." And then you read chapter 7 verse 9, the next verse, and it says:

After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb.

That answers our questions about the 144,000 - it means a great number, from every people group on earth, a crowd that is too vast to count.

What is the purpose of the seal? What are these people being protected from? Verse 14 tells us:

These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and made them white.

Notice that the reference is not future - "These are the ones who *will* be coming out of the great tribulation," as if this were a single event near the end of world history. Rather, these are "coming out of" the great tribulation, now, which refers to the ongoing attack on faith, the ongoing persecution of the believers which began when Jesus was born in Bethlehem and Herod found out about it, and continues through the past 2000+ years. Just as the tectonic plates push against each other and their friction produces earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, so the arrival of the Kingdom of God causes a pushback; one we see in violence, slander, and hatred against Christians.

Chapter 7 ends with a picture of those who have made it through the tribulation. John is told that they will find shelter from God Almighty, that they will never again feel hunger or thirst, that they will be fully protected from the heat of day and that the Lamb

will be their shepherd, leading them to springs of life-giving water. “And God will wipe away all their tears.” (7:17) These are the words of comfort and hope that one of the 24 elders gives to John, words that he passes on to the struggling churches of Asia minor.

Finally, at the beginning of chapter 8, the seventh seal is broken and the immediate consequence is that there is silence in heaven for about half an hour. Silence while the prayers of God’s people are mixed with incense and rise to the throne of the Almighty. Silence is fitting preparation for the drama that is about to unfold.

When this final seal is broken, seven angels with seven trumpets appear. Another angel fills the incense burner with fire from the altar and hurls it to the earth, producing thunder, lightning and earthquake. Once again we are reminded of God coming down to Mt. Sinai to meet with Moses and give him the law, accompanied by thunder and lightning, fire, smoke and a violent earthquake. The seven angels and the sounding of the seven trumpets will be our topic for next week.

Why the high drama? Why is there thunder and lightning and earthquake when God appears? It’s simply to get our attention. People will choose to ignore God, to pretend He doesn’t exist or that He doesn’t matter any more, just so we can do what we want to do. And so God, who loves us and cares what we do with our lives, has to talk really loudly to get our attention. We’ll see next week that this is the primary purpose for all the talk of judgment on the earth - God is trying to get people to the place where they will repent so that He can bless them, heal them, bring them into His presence. But until humans really want that and are willing to humble ourselves and confess our sinfulness to Him, we won’t receive those things. God doesn’t force Himself on us, but totally respects our free will, our choice to honor and obey Him, or our choice to dismiss and reject Him.

So, when I look at the question, “What are the lessons for us from the breaking of the seven seals?”, I think of at least these four things:

1. God’s judgment is an act of mercy. It says that God is concerned about our fate and is warning us not to rebel. Rebellion against God’s rule opens the door for the devil to rule in a person’s life and the devil’s rule can only result in destruction. Judgment steps into that and warns people of the consequences of their rebellion. Notice that all of the judgments listed are partial and that pattern will be seen again in the next chapters that describe the seven trumpets. It means that most people will be given another chance to repent, to forsake rebellious ways and to yield their lives to their Creator and Lord.

2. The second lesson is the power of prayer. The saints are praying in chapter 6, v. 10, “How long, O Lord?” and they ask for judgment to fall against those who have taken their lives and done much evil on the earth. And God responds, even though He asks them to wait a bit longer, He is saying that justice will be served and they will be vindicated. These two chapters indicate that prayer is a beautiful thing to God, something that He takes seriously and that He honors.

3. The third lesson is that evil, while it is prevalent and powerful, is not ultimate. The forces of evil described in the book of Revelation are given permission to act, are given the tools to act, and are limited in their action by a holy God who loves His creation. Judgment has to come, and God has to allow it to come, or He can no longer be called just, but He will not let the effects of this judgment destroy everything. The judgments of Revelation have this “look” to them, as I see it. They seem to be God saying, “All right, if you choose Lucifer and the Kingdom of darkness, I’ll let you have him rule over you ... but only for a time. I will not give to him unlimited access to wreak havoc on the peoples of this earth - people I created and people that I love.”

4. Ultimately, the penalty for rejecting God’s rule, His love, His plan of salvation, is a horrible consequence. But, from the verses we’ve looked at today, it is one that free human beings make with their God-given freedom of choice.

I’m struck by the result of the sixth seal being broken and the signs that followed. The kings, rulers, generals, the wealthy, the powerful and every slave and every free person hid in caves and among the rocks in the mountains and cried to the mountains and the rocks to fall on them. “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the One who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who will be able to survive?” It’s not like God hasn’t given them a choice, and it’s undeniable that they chose to go their own way rather than walk in humble repentance and submission to God’s will. But when their pride is broken and they are surrounded by terror, they still don’t want to repent and seek God, but just want to hide from His face.

In the midst of suffering, of opposition, of cruel emperors and scoffing skeptics, the church still has a responsibility to reach out in love and with purpose; to maybe save some who have held out in their rebellion, hoping that they would never need to face God’s judgment, hoping that He didn’t exist or that He didn’t have the right to demand anything of them. In the heart of Revelation is a call to be faithful in witness, in testifying to our experience of the Lamb and to His worthiness to be worshiped.