

The Seven Seals

If I were to hazard a guess, I would say that most of us are somewhat familiar with the first part of Revelation, the part we've already studied. However, my guess is that tonight we'll be moving into unfamiliar territory. We're going to be talking about the vision of the Seven Seals.

This is where the differences between the various interpretive positions will become obvious for those who know anything about them. The futurists will say that everything from chapter 4 until the end of the book is in the future. None of it has happened yet. So, they will study current events looking for "signs of the times" to see if we're in the last days. They are looking for current events to fulfill these prophecies.

The preterists will say that all of the prophecies from chapter 4 onward have already happened, except maybe for the return of Christ for the partial preterists. They believe that all of the prophecies were foretelling the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. So, for them, the prophecies really have nothing to do with us, because they've already been fulfilled.

You see the extreme opposites there? It's either all or nothing for those two positions. However, I'm taking more of a "middle of the road" position. Rather than connecting the prophecies to only past events or to only future events, we're going to consider the prophecies as a repeating pattern of events that occur throughout the church age. So, instead of one horrible period of tribulation leading up to the second coming of Christ, the church in every age endures tribulation. Instead of one evil person rising up as THE antichrist, there are antichrists, or people who oppose God, throughout history. Thus, the prophecies we'll study are applicable to believers in every generation.

In fact, the book of Revelation could be described as a description of what believers can expect to endure during the last days. We've already discussed that the "last days" refers to the entire period of time from the ascension of Christ to His second coming. So, Revelation is basically showing us reality, what is going to happen to all believers as we await the return of Christ.

I said last time that chapters 1-3 show us reality from the physical, worldly perspective, but that the rest of the book shows us reality from the spiritual, heavenly perspective. I think we have evidence for that here. Think back to our last lesson, when John saw the vision of Christ. *Where was Jesus in that vision?*

He was walking among the lampstands, which we know represent the churches. Jesus was there with the churches, right? The letters to the churches addressed their physical suffering in the world. However, at the beginning of chapter 4, John sees a door standing open in heaven, and he's told, "Come up here." So, John is moving from the physical world to the spiritual realm.

Introduction (4:1)

As we move into our passage for tonight, the very first words we read are "after this." We're used to reading about events in a chronological order. First, this happens; next, something else

happens; then, another event. Normally, what we read (books, newspaper articles, etc.) lists events in the order that they happen.

That's not true with Revelation, though. Remember, Revelation is a series of visions. We're meant to read them symbolically rather than literally. So, when John says, "after this" or "then" or he uses some other transitional phrase, he's actually referring to the order in which he sees the visions, not the order in which events occur.

That's very important to remember, because something called recapitulation is occurring in Revelation. That's a big word, but it simply means that the same events are being described over and over again, but from a different perspective and with a different emphasis each time. It's not a linear story, beginning in chapter 1 and ending in chapter 22. It's like watching replays during a football game. Just as a player is about to score a touchdown, he stumbles out of bounds. So the refs confer with each other to see what each one saw. They watch replays of the play from different camera angles because one will give them a different perspective.

According to Greg Beale, "The repeated series of sevens (whether of letters, seal, trumpets, or bowls) form the structure of the book. Each sevenfold segment (even the letters) deals with the struggle of the forces of good and evil and concludes with the triumph of good and the victory of God."¹ He goes on to say, "John's sets of parallel visions deal with the course of history from the birth of the church at Pentecost until the return of the Lord."² So, what we have is actually the same story told seven different times, but each time using different illustrations and imagery.

The Heavenly Throne Room (4:2-11)

Going back to Scripture, at the end of chapter 3, the last thing we read about Jesus is that He sat down with His Father on His throne (3:21). At the beginning of chapter 4, as John walks through the open heavenly door, he sees a vision of that throne in this glorious throne room.

On the Throne (4:2-3)

First, John describes the One seated on the throne, who had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. There was also a rainbow around the throne that had the appearance of emerald (v.3). What we get from this description of the precious jewels is a feel for God's wealth, His beauty, His glory, His splendor. Nancy Guthrie describes it this way, "God sits on the throne of the universe radiating from his being the splendor of his holiness, the beauty of his character, the magnificence of his mercy, the brilliance of his plans and purposes, and the majesty of his sovereign reign."³

What about the rainbow? What do you think that signifies?

¹Beale, Greg. *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, 15.

²Ibid., 25.

³Guthrie, Nancy. *Blessed: Experiencing the Promise of the Book of Revelation*, 89.

Quoting Nancy Guthrie again, the rainbow serves to remind us of “God’s mercy in judgment and his covenantal faithfulness.”⁴⁴ That’s an allusion to the story of Noah. When Noah and his family finally got off the ark, Noah built an altar and made a sacrifice to God. God then made a covenant with Noah, as we read in Genesis 9:11-13:

“I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”

So regardless of how the rainbow is used today, it was initially a sign of the covenant between God and Noah. God promised to bless Noah and his offspring, and to never destroy the earth with a flood again. So, whenever Noah or his descendants saw the rainbow, they would remember God’s mercy in sparing Noah’s family, and His goodness and love towards them.

How does the story of Noah’s ark relate to us as believers in Christ?

It took faith for Noah to build the ark, didn’t it? He had to trust that what God told him was true. But because he acted on that faith, Noah was protected from God’s judgment through faith by going into the ark. In same way, those who are by faith in Christ will be protected from God’s coming judgement. So, as we read about the opening of the seals, which reflect God’s judgment upon the earth, we can remember God’s mercy and covenantal faithfulness to us as well, knowing that we will be shielded from the judgment to come.

Around the Throne (4:4-11)

After describing the One on the throne, John then describes what’s going on around the throne. (v.4-11).

In verse 4, John writes, “Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments with golden crowns on their heads.” It’s commonly believed that the 24 elders represent the 12 tribes from the Old Testament along with the 12 apostles from the New Testament. Together they represent all of the redeemed from throughout history, which shows that all believers, both from the Old Testament and New Testament, will be together in heaven.

The white garments represent the righteousness of Christ. The only way that we can stand before God is to be clothed in His righteousness. The fact that they are wearing crowns and are seated on thrones refers to the promise that believers will be able to reign with Christ, as Christ actually promised to the believers in the church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:22). Those who conquered would reign with Him.

⁴⁴Ibid., 90.

John also writes that emanating from God's throne is lightning and thunder (v.5a), which reflects God's power.

What event from the Old Testament does this bring to mind?

It brings to mind Exodus 19:16-19, where the Israelites are to meet with God at Mt. Sinai. God was going to come down onto the mountain for the people to see. When He did, "there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and very loud trumpet blast" (Ex. 19:16). Apparently, thunder and lightning are a common occurrence when one is in the presence of God, which makes me look at thunderstorms in a whole new way, right? That's just God showing off His power and might.

Next, John writes that before the throne are seven torches, which are the seven spirits of God (v.5b). This is not the first time we've seen this imagery, is it? In Revelation 1:4, we read about "the seven spirits who are before his throne." Because of the Trinitarian blessing that John is offering there, we know that the seven spirits are in fact the Holy Spirit, referred to as seven because that's the number of perfection or completion.

Also, before the throne John sees a sea of glass, like crystal (v.6a). Nancy Guthrie points out that this sea of glass would perfectly mirror or reflect God's glory back to him.⁵ Vern Poythress actually lists several different reasons that the sea of glass might be significant. First, it could allude to the waters of the Red Sea from Exodus. When God pushed back the sea, He demonstrated His power and victory over pharaoh, who was the evil or even satanic figure in that story. This foreshadowed God's ultimate victory over evil (Isaiah 51:9-11). Second, quoting Poythress, "The extent and beauty of the seas when taken with the precious stones suggest the magnificence and preciousness of God's throne."⁶ Third, the sea could allude to the sea in Solomon's temple, described in 1 Kings 7:23, which was a type of basin used for the priests to perform ritual cleansing before offering sacrifices. It's been suggested that what we see in the description of heaven actually is meant to mirror the temple, so this would make sense.

Then, John writes that around the throne are four strange-looking creatures (v.6b-8). This is an allusion to Ezekiel 1:5-14, where Ezekiel saw a vision of cherubim, whose job it was to attend God's throne. Now, Ezekiel's vision and John's vision are a little different from each other. The details don't quite match up, but that just shows that what we're dealing with is so foreign and so strange that it's hard to describe. We can't fully comprehend the reality of heaven. In fact, Poythress writes, "Any vision of God and His throne room is less like a photograph and more like an artistic impression. It is a vision which symbolizes rather than photographs the realities it presents."⁷ So we shouldn't get caught up in comparing every little detail of the separate visions. Let's just try to discern what God is trying to reveal through the vision.

⁵Guthrie, 91.

⁶Poythress, Vern. *The Returning King*, 104.

⁷Poythress, 105.

Going back to the four figures, one looks like a lion (which is the noblest of all creatures), one like an ox (which is the strongest creature), one like an eagle (which is the swiftest creature), and one like a man (which is the wisest of all creatures). These four different creatures represent all types of living beings.⁸ This could symbolize that all of creation will one day be redeemed, and that all of creation is worshipping the Creator.⁹ Because that's what they are doing here...they're worshipping. When we read Revelation 4:8-11, we see the four creatures and the twenty-four elders all repeating this praise to God endlessly.

They say,

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come! (v.8b)

Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created. (v.11)

Poythress sums up this scene this way:

The four living creatures celebrate the supreme, unimaginable holiness of God, describing God's lordship over the past, present, and future. The twenty-four elders join the choir, acknowledging the majesty and authority of God, then pledging their submission, obedience, and reverence.¹⁰

So, we have this beautiful scene, with all believers from all times joining together with all of creation to continually sing praises to their Creator.

The Scroll and the Lamb (5:1-14)

Up to this point, John has given us a good description of what he's seeing in this heavenly throne room. If this were a movie, that would be the opening scene, making us familiar with the characters and the setting. As we move into chapter five, though, we start to see the drama unfold.

The One seated on the throne, which is of course God, is holding a scroll. The scroll is covered with writing, front and back, and on it are seven seals. This scroll contains all of God's plans for human history, including judgment and salvation. These plans were established from before time began, and they were set in motion with death and resurrection of Christ. However, they are sealed, indicating that they cannot be changed.¹¹

We read, for example, in Job 42:2, "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted." Also, Proverbs 19:21 reads, "Many are the plans in the mind of a man,

⁸Guthrie, 93.

⁹Thomas, Derek, *Let's Study Revelation*, 46.

¹⁰Poythress, 107.

¹¹Guthrie, 95.

but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.” God’s plans are sure; they’re firm; they’re written in stone. Nothing we do can change God’s or alter His plans in any way.

Why is it so important that God’s plans never change?

That’s comforting, isn’t it? We never have to wonder how to please God or worry about God getting mad and taking away our salvation. It’s also an example of God’s sovereignty.

So, God has these plans for the world that need to be carried out. Then an angel comes forward and asks a question, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” (5:2). He’s basically saying, “Who can do this? Who can carry out these plans for God?”

Why couldn’t God open His own scroll? Why couldn’t He fulfill His own plans?

Nancy Guthrie explains it this way:

For God the Father to open on his own the scroll that pours out pardon for sin would be like sweeping sin under the rug of the universe. If God were to open on his own, with no mediator or protector, the scroll that pours out wrath, no one would escape the punishment that will be poured out. Someone must come onto this dramatic heavenly scene to demonstrate the justice of God against evil as well as the sacrifice of God to accomplish salvation.¹²

We need somebody to serve as mediator between God and mankind, but it must be someone worthy, someone pure and righteous, without sin. So, the search begins, but no one is found in heaven or on earth or under the earth who is worthy to open the seals (5:3-4). Just as John begins to weep, thinking that all hope is lost, the Hero appears on the scene.

An elder tells John, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (5:5). John looks, and there He is, the conquering Hero...a Lamb that looked like it was slain? That’s probably not what John expected is it? We’d expect a lion to be the Savior, but not so much a lamb. However, we are familiar with that imagery. We know that Jesus is the perfect sacrificial Lamb, slain to pay for the sins of His people and to conquer Satan. We know that He lived a perfect sinless life, so He possessed the purity and righteousness necessary to be the mediator.

This Lamb is described as having seven horns and seven eyes (5:6), which represent His strength and power. Derek Thomas writes, “The Lamb (Jesus) sees and knows what is taking place on earth (eyes) and is able to do something about it (horns=strength).”¹³ The seven spirits here again refers to the Holy Spirit in His sevenfold fulness.

This Lamb, Jesus, steps forward and takes the scroll from God, who is seated on the throne. This sets off another chorus of praise from the four creatures and the twenty-four elders. This time,

¹²Ibid., 96.

¹³Thomas, 46.

however, the praise is for Jesus instead of the Father. They are proclaiming His worth because He was slain and He ransomed for God a people (5:9-10).

Chapter four hinted at the fact that all of creation joins together in worship, but chapter five makes it clear. It says in verse 11 that thousands and thousands of angels join the chorus, and in verse 13, we see that “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them” is worshipping as well. This time, however, they are praising both God and Jesus, according the verse 13, which says, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

Opening the Scroll (6:1-17)

Now, Jesus begins opening the scroll one seal at a time. Nancy Guthrie describes the opening of the seals this way:

We’re going to see that the opening of each seal reveals something about what we can expect as history unfolds as we await the new creation. We don’t have to wonder what we should expect our lives to be like in this in-between time as we wait for it. Revelation 6 and 7 tell us what to expect.¹⁴

Derek Thomas says that Revelation six “gives us a way to look at the troubles of this world and give them an explanation from a Christian and God-centered point of view.”¹⁵ So again, what John sees with the opening of each seal, or at least the first few, is just our physical reality, what we are experiencing here on earth, but from a heavenly perspective. God is pulling back the curtain to show the cause for some the suffering that exists on earth.

The First Four Seals

Often, the first four seals are grouped together, because what John sees for each one is very similar.

- 1) First, John sees a rider on a white horse who came to conquer (6:1-2).
 - a. Because of the white horse, sometimes people think that this represents Christ, but because of the context, that doesn’t really make sense. Thomas says, “Satan mimics Christ. What we have here is parody. The figure riding forth to conquer is not Christ but His enemy.”¹⁶ This actually represents all those power-hungry people who sought to conquer other people and overthrow other nations through war, those who sought to gain power by trampling on others. The white in this case symbolizes victory.
- 2) Next, John sees a rider on a red horse who causes people to slay or kill each other (6:3-4). The red of course symbolizes the bloodshed, not just from war, but from the murder and senseless killing that takes place all too often.

¹⁴Guthrie, 107.

¹⁵Thomas, 54.

¹⁶Ibid., 56.

- 3) Then, John sees a rider on a black horse who causes famine (6:5-6). When it talks about “a quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius,” it’s wanting us to see how scarce and expensive food had become. A denarius was one day’s wage. So, a man could work all day and only make just enough to feed himself, much less a family. But it also says, “Do not harm the oil and wine!” Apparently, the rich were still living well, while the poor were barely surviving.
- 4) Finally, John sees a rider on a pale horse who causes death (6:7-8). This horse is a pale, sickly color, the color of a corpse. This one kind of encompasses the previous three seals, because it indicates that the deaths occur from sword, famine, pestilence, wild beasts. People are dying for all kinds of reasons.

One thing to note is the similarity here with Ezekiel 14:21, which says, “For thus says the Lord God: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgement, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast!” Doesn’t that sound a lot like the disastrous acts of the four horsemen? According to Ezekiel, who sent those disastrous acts upon Jerusalem? God!

We see in Revelation that the horsemen are also sent by God, or more specifically by Jesus. Each time a seal is opened, we read that one of the four living creatures calls forth the rider on the horse (6:1, 3, 5, 7). The four living creatures are cherubin, and their purpose is to serve God. They’re not going to act on their own, but only at His command.

We also see that these riders are given authority over a fourth of the earth (6:8). Who has given them that authority? Jesus! These judgements are not ultimately being caused by Satan or evil forces, although they may be the instruments of the calamities. Jesus is the one controlling it all and giving the evil forces their authority.

That may be a hard pill for some to swallow. *Why would Jesus cause war, bloodshed, famine, and death? Why would He give authority to evil people to do such bad things?*

I like Nancy Guthrie’s answer. She says, “While these hardships serve the purpose of judgment against those who have set themselves against the Lamb, they are intended to have a sanctifying purpose among all who belong to the Lamb.”¹⁷ So reason that Jesus would cause these things two-fold: judgment for the wicked and sanctification for the righteous.

You might also notice that these judgments are things that have been happening throughout history. There has always been war somewhere on earth. Every day when you turn on the news you hear about someone killing someone else. There are parts of the world where food is extremely scarce and people are dying of starvation. God is not going to send judgment only at the end of time; He is sending judgment all the time, although that judgment may intensify as we get closer to Christ’s return.

¹⁷Guthrie, 111.

Guthrie writes, “Rather than seeing judgment only as something that will happen at the end of time, we need to see that even now a world that has rejected and rebelled against God is experiencing judgment. It’s not yet the final judgment. That’s coming, but this world is experiencing a measure of that judgment now.”¹⁸ John Calvin wrote, “All the calamities which happen in the world are so many demonstrations of the wrath of God; and hence we learn what an awful destruction awaits us, if we do not avert it.”

So, the first four seals reveal the judgment that God is sending upon the earth. We should expect to encounter war, famine, murder, disease, and death. We should not be surprised by these things. They are intended as punishment to the wicked, as well as a warning to turn away from their wickedness. They are also intended to sanctify believers by causing them to rely on God for protection.

The Fifth Seal

The first four seals are very similar, each revealing a rider on a horse. The fifth, seal, however, is very different. With the opening of this seal, John sees “the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God” (6:9). He’s seeing the souls of the martyrs crying out for justice. This shows that we should expect to be persecuted for our faith. Remember, the scroll that Jesus is opening contains God’s plan for human history, and persecution is clearly part of that plan.

We notice, though, that these souls are “under the altar,” referring to the altar on which Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of His people. Being under that altar represents safety and protection, and brings to mind Romans 8:35-39. So, these martyred Christians, although persecuted, are protected by the shed blood of Christ.

They are crying out, however, asking, “How long before you will judge and avenge our blood?” They want justice. It’s not wrong to want justice when we see some horrible evil taking place. We must make sure, however, that it is *justice* we want for God’s sake rather than *revenge* for our own sake. We have to separate here earthly justice, where a person is punished for breaking the laws of the government, and God’s justice, where a person is sent to hell for breaking God’s commands. It’s ok to seek justice here on earth. If someone steals your car, it’s ok to call the police and hope that they catch the person. But we’re told to pray for our enemies, praying for God to be merciful to them just as He was merciful to us. We should never want any person to spend their eternity in hell, although it may be tempting to want that when we think about certain people.

When they ask “How long?” they are told to rest awhile until the number of those to be killed is complete. This shows two things. First, more believers were going to be killed. Revelation never promises that believers will escape persecution and tribulation. Instead, it encourages us to patiently endure the suffering that is sure to come. Nancy Guthrie writes, “Often believers are more interested in demanding their rights and defending their position than in developing

¹⁸Guthrie, 110.

patient endurance in the persecution Jesus told us to expect. Revelation is not written as a guide on how to avoid persecution but rather as an encouragement to endure persecution faithfully.”¹⁹

Second, the suffering and persecution of God’s people does have a limit. God will only allow it for a certain amount of time before He brings it to an end. Quoting Nancy Guthrie again, “God has set a day when he will set things right. The suffering of God’s people has an expiration date. We have to wait a little longer. We have to wait for the day depicted in the opening of the sixth seal.”²⁰

The Sixth Seal

The first five seals show things that we should expect to occur during the normal course of human history. However, this sixth seal actually brings us to the end of history, to the final Day of Judgment, when Christ will return. We receive a frightening description of what this will be like. There will be earthquakes. The sun will go dark. The moon will become red like blood. The stars will fall from the sky. There will be mighty winds. The sky will disappear, and even the face of the earth will be changed. This is what the return of Christ will be like, and there’s no way that anyone will miss it. This is a cataclysmic upheaval of both the earth and the sky.

Now, I don’t know if this is a literal description of what will happen, but it does use imagery that is common to other descriptions of the Day of Judgment, as in the following verses:

- Isaiah 13:10
- Ezekiel 32:7-8
- Joel 2:10
- Matthew 24:29

Whether this is literal or not, we can take from it the fact that the earth itself is responding to the coming of its Creator. The upheaval of the earth and sky indicates the destruction of the old creation to make way for the new.²¹

As I said, there’s no way that anybody is missing what’s going on. So how do people respond to this destruction? They run and hide. Revelation 6:15 says, “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.” The people know this is judgment sent from God, because they cry out for salvation. However, they do not repent and call out to God. In verse 16, they call to the mountains, asking the mountains to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb. Rather than respond with repentance, they respond with terror.

The 144,000 Sealed (7:1-8)

At the end of chapter six, as the people hide from the wrath of the One seated on the throne and from the Lamb, they ask a crucial question. They ask, “Who can stand?” They are not asking

¹⁹Ibid., 112.

²⁰Ibid., 113.

²¹Poythress, 117.

“Who can stand this horrible destruction of the earth?” They are actually asking “Who can stand the wrath of the Lamb?” Chapter seven provides with the answer to that question.

Remember, there are seven seals. Six have been opened, and we’re in the middle of this catastrophic Day of Judgment. But as we move into chapter seven, we have here is a pause in the opening of the seals. It’s like Jesus is saying, “Hold on. You want to know you can stand, or who can survive, my judgment? Let me tell you about that.”

John is shown four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, which a metaphor for the whole world. They are holding back these winds, which are symbolic of the final judgment that is to come. We saw in chapter six the earth shaking and the heavens being destroyed in preparation for the final judgment. We see here the angels standing ready to unleash that judgment.

Before they can, though, another angel cries out, “Stop! Don’t let go of those winds, don’t release the destruction, until we have sealed the servants of God.” This shows that God’s servants, those with the seal or the mark, will be protected from harm. At least, they will be protected from spiritual harm, although they may have to endure physical harm.

This marking of the saints could be an allusion to Ezekiel 9:1-4. In this passage, God is going to send executioners to kill the idolators in Jerusalem. Prior to that, though, He sends someone to mark the foreheads of those to be spared from His judgment. It may also refer to the Exodus, where the mark of the blood on the doorposts indicates those that are to be spared from judgment. Either way, we see that God knows who belongs to Him, and He has sealed them and will protect them forever. Those who are sealed with the blood of the Lamb will not have to face the wrath of the Lamb.²²

Then John is shown a number of those who are sealed, 144,000 people from every tribe of Israel. What do we do with the fact that it says the 144,000 are from the tribes of Israel? It even lists the tribes. So, could this number just be referring to Jews? There are those who would argue that. The Dispensational interpreters would say that this represents the number of Jews saved during the seven-year tribulation. But the order in which the tribes are listed differs from any other listing in Scripture, which indicates a symbolic reading is more likely. Also, the number 144,000 is referred to again in Revelation 14, where it’s not connected with the tribes of Israel, but just with those redeemed from the earth (14:3), which seems to indicate all of the redeemed. Typically, the symbolism of a number doesn’t change, so it shouldn’t refer to just Jews in one place, and all believers in another.

Many actually believe that it’s a mathematical formula. The number twelve can symbolize the fullness or the completion of God’s people. So, you take the twelve tribes of Israel (which represent the complete number of Old Testament believers) and multiply that by the twelve apostles (which represent the complete number of New Testament believers), and you get 144.

²²Guthrie, 116.

Ten is also a number of completion, but we don't just multiply the 144 by 10. We multiply it by 10x10x10, or 10 to the third degree. When something is raised to the third degree, or repeated three times, in Scripture, it indicates that whatever is being said or referred to is being emphasized to the highest degree. So, the number 144,000 is not to be taken as literal number of people. It's just really emphasizing that the number of those saved is complete. No one was overlooked. No one got left out. All of God's chosen will be saved...every last person. The fact that they are numbered here, also shows that God knows and cares for each and every person.

Derek Thomas has a different interpretation, however. He says that the numbering of the tribes could reflect Number where the fighting men are being counted. He says, "Revelation 7 therefore is about an army who will fight for the Lamb and emerge victorious."²³ I thought that was an interesting take on it, as well.

The Great Multitude Worshipping (7:9-17)

After seeing the 144,000, John then sees a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They are all standing around the throne, dressed in white robes, palm branches in hand, praising their God and the Lamb. This great multitude that no one could number also represents all redeemed believers.

So, which is it? Can they be numbered (as in the 144,000) or can they not be numbered? Again, we must keep in mind that this is symbolic. So, both visions are accurate, they are just making a different point. The 144,000 emphasizes the fact that the number of the sealed is complete. It also reflects God's knowledge and care for all of His people. However, the great multitude emphasizes the fact that the number of the sealed is vast, and includes people from all walks of life. This also shows that the promise to Abraham has been fulfilled, that all nations would be blessed through Him.²⁴

The first five seals show what we can expect while living on earth. The sixth seal shows what we can expect when Jesus returns. This interlude shows what we can expect once we get to heaven. We will join with all believers from throughout history and from all over the world, singing praise to our God and to our Lamb. They recognize the fact that salvation belongs to Christ. The only reason that they are in heaven is because of the Lamb who was slain. The question asked at the end of chapter six, "Who can stand the wrath?" has been answered. Those who can stand are those clothed in the white robes, which represent the righteousness of Christ, gained by being covered or marked by His blood.

But it's not just the redeemed that will praise God. The angels and the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures are also worshipping. Once again, we see all of creation joining together to praise the Creator.

²³Thomas, 65.

²⁴Poythress, 119.

In the midst of this heavenly worship service, one of the elders turns to John and asks, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” (7:13). John replies, “Sir, you know.” And the elder said, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.” Some use this as support for belief in one main period of tribulation right before the Second Coming. However, Vern Poythress writes, “Tribulations occur for Christians throughout the church age, so the whole age can be characterized as one of tribulation.”²⁵ According to Thomas, “The great tribulation is already upon us and the only way to be rescued from it is to wash our robes white through the blood of the Lamb.”²⁶

Chapter seven closes with these words of comfort and hope for those who have endured tribulation (7:15-17):

Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.
They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore,
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eye.

This also is what we can expect when we get to heaven. We will be sheltered in the presence of God. We will not want for anything. Jesus will take care of us and guide us, and God Himself will comfort us.

Now, I want you to think back to last week. We studied the seven churches. They were the original audience to the letter of Revelation, which contains this vision of the seals. We talked last time about what the people in those churches were going through. I’ve said more than once that the letters to the churches describe reality from a physical perspective where the other visions describe reality from a spiritual perspective. Think about what those churches were enduring. Then think about what’s being revealed with the opening of these seals, and what that tells us about what we should expect to endure. *How does the opening of the seals relate to what the believers in the seven churches were enduring?*

How do you think they would have responded to these visions? What hope or comfort would they have gotten from it?

How should we respond? What hope or comfort can we receive?

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Thomas, 67.

The Seventh Seal (8:1)

This brings us to the seventh and final seal. We saw the judgments of the four horsemen in the first four seals. In the fifth seal, we saw the martyrs asking, "How long must we wait for justice?" and being told "Just a little while longer." We saw the destruction that will accompany Christ's Second Coming in the sixth seal. We saw the final judgment delayed until all of the redeemed could be sealed for protection.

Now, as we prepare for the opening of the last seal, we expect to finally see Christ return in all His glory, right? That's what everything has been building up to, with this crescendo of praise from all of creation.

Then the seal is opened and there's...silence (8:1) We're not told what this seal reveals. It's rather anticlimactic, isn't it? Again, the opening of the scroll and the seals is God's unveiling of His plan for history. It's like He's just not ready to reveal the final portion of His plan. But whatever is revealed when this seal is opened, those in heaven respond with a stunned silence. They are awestruck by what they see.

And we will end with that cliffhanger, so stay tuned for our next episode!