

Session 08

The seals are opened

Revelation 6

The Lamb takes the initiative in all that is about to happen, v1. He is the One who opens each of the seals in turn, causing the contents of each section to happen in space and time – it is a word of power and authority.

The **Father's secret purposes are now revealed and released** in human history. This is the meaning of “**mystery**” in Scripture, e.g. Eph. 3:8-1, 1Cor. 15:51-55, Rom. 11:25-33.

One of the Living Creatures calls (commands with a voice like thunder), c.f. 4:5. **John is to “come and see”**, 1:1-2, 11.

The four horsemen of the Apocalypse, v 2-8.

These events are **preliminary judgements, warnings to repent**, while there is still time, c.f. 9:20-21. These modalities of judgement are common in the Bible, e.g. Jer. 15:1-4, 24:10, 29:15-19, Ezek. 5:11-12, 16-17. Jesus taught that they would continue throughout the period until His return but they are not signs that the end of the age is imminent, Matt. 24:6-8. Later visions in Revelation (trumpets and bowls) describe more severe judgements as history moves towards its conclusion.

“**And I looked, and behold ...**” There is a sense of surprise and wonder.

This vision connects with Zech. 1:7-16 and 6:1-8 although some of the details are different. Zechariah saw four horsemen. The first was on a red horse (judgement) and is revealed in v11 to be the Angel of the LORD (God in human appearance i.e. Jesus). He intercedes with the LORD of Hosts (the Father) on behalf of Jerusalem and Judah, v12, to intervene on their behalf. J and J are suffering (chastisement) for their sins. The nations are at ease despite having maliciously increased that suffering, v11b, 15, c.f. Psalm 137:7, Obadiah v10-14. The LORD is angry and will act in mercy towards Jerusalem and in anger against their persecutors, v15-21, and c.f. 6:8.

The colours of the horses in revelation are different – white, fiery red, black, and pale (green). These are symbolic of conquest (victory), war, famine (scarcity), and death. Those in Zech. were red x2, sorrel (mottled), and white.

The situation in Revelation is more severe and is universal. It is the prelude to the “Great Day of the wrath of the Lamb”, v16-17.

The bridge between seals 1-4 and 6 is found in the 5th seal, v9-11 – **the prayers of the martyrs**. This is parallel to the situation of Judah and Jerusalem in Zechariah.

The identity of the rider on the white horse is disputed. The first horseman in Zechariah is “The Angel of the LORD”. In Rev. 19:11-16 Jesus rides on a white horse, followed by the armies of Heaven on white horses. He rides to conquest and victory over the followers of the “Beast” and the “False prophet”, v19-20. This identification seems to fit well with chapter 6. **Alternatively the rider on the white horse may be an angel acting on His behalf. Jesus received power and authority from the Father to reign and conquer**, Psalm 2, Psalm 45:3-6, Psalm 110, Zech. 9:10. He can delegate that to His servants.

The rider on the second horse releases the judgement of war, Matt. 24:6-7, and the implication of the end of the chapter is that this is of increased severity and more universal, prior to the final acts of judgement. War is a chief cause of the suffering described in the other two scenarios.

The rider on the third horse releases scarcity and famine. It is uneven in effect, as is the case in war.

The rider on the fourth horse represents death and the grave, claiming the victims of conflict as far as they were permitted to do.

God remains in ultimate control and the extent, although huge, is limited, 3:10, c.f. Luke 21:10-11.

The fifth seal takes us to Heaven where a significant but hidden activity is in progress – the prayers of the martyrs who have died for the truth of the Word of God, holding fast to their witness, c.f. 1:5, 18, 2:10, 13, 3:8, Heb. 10:32-39, 2Tim. 4:6-8; **their prayers are connected with events on earth.**

Their cry “How long” echoes the cries of the oppressed people of God throughout the ages, Psalm 13:1-2, 74:10, 18-23, 79:10-12, 94:1-7. It is a cry for justice, for vindication, Gen. 4:10-11, Luke 18:1-8, Rom.

12:17-21, 1Peter 2:18-25, and that cry is heard. They are told to wait for God's appointed time – till the total number of the martyrs is complete. This does not mean some fixed quota – they are martyrs as a consequence of their witness and this must continue until the Gospel of the Kingdom has been preached to all nations/people groups, Matt. 24:9. Meanwhile given the white robe of victory - they are the conquerors, Rom. 8:36-39, and are told to rest – in Zechariah the nations were “at ease/rest” but this is the false complacency of those who do not believe in the end of the story, about to be revealed when the 6th seal is opened.

The 6th seal takes us to the end of the story, v12-17. This cycle will be repeated, e.g. 11:15-18.

It inaugurates the “Great Day of the wrath of the Lamb”, v16-17, Rev. 1:7. This comes as a shock but remember the paradoxical revelation of the Lamb in chapter 5. Jesus spoke of the events of AD70 that would follow His rejection and crucifixion, c.f. Luke 13:34-34, 19:41-44. The events preceding His return would be similar but much more severe, Luke 21. Jesus spoke of cosmic signs, 21:25-26. Acts 2:17-20 describes the events at the beginning and end of the Last Days, from Pentecost to the return of Jesus, Acts 1:11.

Poetic language is being employed, c.f. v13-14 and v15-16. We need to interpret this in the light of similar language in earlier parts of the Bible, e.g. David describing deliverance from Saul, Psalm 18:4-15 or Habakkuk referring to the Exodus, 3:3-15. **This does not diminish from the overwhelming and catastrophic reality of the actual events.** It affects all, whatever their rank or station in life, v15. No one can escape and no one can resist, Rev. 6:17. Suddenly all the illusions are broken and the disaster of a life lived in independence of God is exposed in the blinding light of His coming; see 1 Thess. 5:2-3, 2 Thess. 1:6-10 and 2 Peter 3:10-12.

The Day of the LORD is a common description of God's intervention in judgement. There are many examples of this from the past, all harbingers of the great and final Day, Hosea 10:7-8 (Israel), Isaiah 2:1, 10-22, Joel 2:11, 30-31 (Judah), Isaiah 13:1, 9-13 (Babylon), 63:1-6 (Edom), and Ezekiel 32:7-8 (Egypt). The description of the localized and limited judgement, Luke 21:20-24, sometimes merges into the universal and final one, Luke 21:25-27.

Matt. 25 combines answers to three questions, v3

- When will these things (the destruction of the Temple) happen?
- What will be the sign of your coming?
- What will be the sign of the end of the age?

The answers are intertwined. The events of AD70 prefigured the events at the end of the age, preceding Jesus' return – the coming of the Son of Man.

There are **common features but intensified at the end of the age:**

- False Messiahs, v4, c.f. 11-13, 23-26
- Wars, famines, pestilences, earthquakes, v6-8 (c.f. Rev. 6:1-8)
- Persecution and tribulation v9-10, 15-20, c.f. v21-22, Daniel 12:1.

There are **features specific to the end of the age:**

- Completion of the task of preaching the Gospel, v14
- The end of the times of the Gentiles and their occupation of Jerusalem, Luke 21:24
- Great disturbances in the heavens – cosmic signs, v29. These were used as metaphors for the Day of the LORD in the OT but are real and physical at the end of the age.
- Major disasters and distress among the nations and widespread fear of what is happening to the environment and the survival of the planet, Luke 21:25-26.
- The sign of the Son of Man, Matt. 24:30-31 – His coming in the clouds of Heaven (glory)

The first five seals are essentially about the “common features” and were released at the beginning of the era of the Last Days. The sixth seal jumps to the final event, c.f. Acts 2:19-20. The Trumpets and the Bowls will focus on the latter part of the Last Days.