

Rev 6-7, The Seven Seals

Overview¹

Trace four important relationships in which the seals stand: to the previous two chapters; to the following part of Rev.; to the Olivet Discourse and in particular Matthew's record of it; and finally among themselves.

Relation to Chapters 4 and 5.

As inspiring as these earlier chapters are, they serve mainly to prepare for the events here, the opening of the seven seals on the prophetic book.

- 4 introduced us to the stage setting in heaven.
- 5 introduced the book of judgment and identified the one worthy to open it.
- Now finally we get to the opening of the book.

Application: Chapters 4-5 emphasize the "otherness" of God, his exalted position on his throne. Now we see that he can and does intervene in daily events on earth. He is both transcendent (beyond creation) and immanent (active in and through it). To emphasize either without the other is to open the door to serious error--either the "hands-off" God of liberal "Christianity" who neither can nor will judge sin, or the impersonal Force of animism and Star Wars. According to the Bible God is both a Person with a Will, who demands and deserves our worship, and an active force in the world around us.

Relation to the other series of judgments in Rev.

We are entering the first of three "sevens" of judgment (seals, trumpets, bowls).

Seal to trumpet transition:

- The seventh seal is set apart from the first six: 6:1-12, then 8:1.
- The seventh seal consists of the trumpets in 8:1 ff. The seventh is as much an introduction to the next seven as a completion of its own.
- Confirmation of this: the divine thunderstorm and earthquake that appeared at the beginning of the seals section (4:5) also appears within the seventh seal, at the beginning of the trumpets (8:5).

We'll see that the trumpets and bowls follow this same pattern. Defer discussion of details for now.

- In each, the first six are set apart from the seventh.
 - Trumpets: 8:1-9:13, then 11:15
 - Bowls (not as pronounced): 16:1-12, then 16:17
- The seventh introduces the section that follows, in addition to concluding its own.

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- Each of the sections so introduced brings us back to the divine storm and earthquake (11:19; 16:18).

Application: Sort of like Jaws II: "Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water" God's judgments are not depicted as a short blip through which you can hold your breath, but like an endless series of breakers rolling up on the beach, one after the other. For those who have eyes to see, the waves have begun to roll in, and they only get worse from here on out, until the Lord finally comes. If you're not a believer, take warning from these early waves. Refuge is available, but only on God's terms. If you are a believer, frustrated over the wickedness of the world, lift up your head. The disasters we see around us are evidence of God's control and his coming resolution.

Relation to the Olivet Discourse. Rely mainly on Matthew.

Review of the Discourse: five phases of history

- The Beginning of Sorrows--first century. Matt. 24:4-12. Three successive phases, separated by "then" (9,10).
- The Days of Vengeance--fall of Jerusalem. The first of two particular periods of suffering that the Lord describes. Like Antiochus and the Antichrist in Daniel, the earlier is a foreshadowing of the latter. They are separated by the times of the Gentiles. No gospel records both of them. This period is in Mark and Luke, NOT Matthew. NB: 11:1,2 suggests that the temple was still standing in John's time. Would fit a dating within the reign of Nero, perhaps in the persecutions that led to the death of Paul. In this case, he may not yet understand the distinction between the two periods of intense suffering of which the Lord spoke, and this may color what we find in the balance of the book.
- The Times of the Gentiles--until now. Matt. 24:14.
- The Great Tribulation--presence of Antichrist. Matt. 24:15-28.
- The Return of Christ--to set up his kingdom. Matt. 24:29-31. Marked by cosmic signs.

Linkages with the seals

- Sixth seal and the return of Christ. Compare Matt. 24:29-30 with Rev. 6:12-16.
- Fifth seal (martyred saints) fits three periods in the Discourse:
 - the Great Tribulation
 - the Days of Vengeance
 - the Beginning of Sorrows (Matt. 24:9,10).
- These correspondences suggest that we may find the first four seals in Matt. 24:4-8. NB: NOT the "Great Tribulation," but the present age--even before the fall of Jerusalem!
 - First: Crowned conquerer on a white horse. Matt. 24:5, false Christs.
 - Second: War on a red horse. Matt. 24:6,7a.
 - Third: Famine on a black horse. Matt. 24:7b.

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- Fourth: Death on a pale horse. Matt. 24:7c (we'll see that this rider corresponds particularly with pestilence).

Relation to one another.

The first four seals are distinct from the other in being introduced each by one of the four beasts that attend the divine throne. Lion, Calf, Man, Eagle--do these correspond with the particular judgments named?

As so often before, John is not the first one to see these heavenly images, and we can learn much from earlier appearances. The four horses are a theme in Zech:

- 1:7-11, sent forth from the Lord to walk to and fro through the earth.
- 6:1-8, same mission; here, the horses pull chariots, and "let off" God's Spirit, in judgment.

Significance of the invitation to John to "come and see": unlike some of the later judgments, which are clearly supernatural, people are apt to explain the events of the first four seals naturalistically. The four beats force us to recognize them as part of God's continuing judgment on the earth.

Application: These are of more than academic interest to us. Not just things that will happen in the future, after the church is taken out of the way; but things going on in John's day and right on down til now.

- Be prepared for them.
- Recognize that they are permitted by God, and unleashed by the sovereign hand of the LJC himself.

John's angelic guides: (cf. 22:16)

- 1:11 = 4:1
- 10:9
- 11:1
- 17:1,7
- 21:9 (speaking through 22:1, 6, 8, 9)

First Seal, 1-2: Antichrist²

Imagery is very much like ch. 19:11-16

- Rider on a white horse
- Armed (in 6 with a bow; in 19 with a sword out of his mouth, cf. 1:16)
- Crowned (6:2 stephanos "athletic award", 19:12 diadem "kingly crown")
- "conquer," cf. the Lamb's conquests in the past (5:8) and the future (17:14).

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Has led many commentators to identify this either as Christ or as the church spreading the kingdom of God over the whole earth. (Amillennial vision)

But there are differences:

- the weapon; why would the Lord abandon his divine Word for a bow?
- the crown: not the imperial diadem of ch. 19, but one indicating victory in the contest. Yet he has not yet conquered; he only goes forth to conquer. The crown should come at the end!
- The other three horsemen are strange companions for the Lord Jesus.

Based on our study of Matt. 24, the first thing we expect (Matt. 24:5) is false Christs, those who share an outward appearance with the LJC, but seek to draw people away from him. These have been around since the first century; 1 John 2:18; 4:3. Conclude that the first judgment God releases on the unbelieving world is the Spirit of Antichrist, which can only work with his permission (cf. Satan's abuse of Job). The crown is "given" to him, cf. the following seals; God's permission for him to look like a victor. Whether it is the RCC during the middle ages, or communism as the state religion during most of this century, or New Age philosophy in our day, it is part of God's judgment on unbelievers.

Application: From God's perspective, Antichrist is not a fearful enemy who has a chance of winning, but one among many judgments that he is releasing on an unbelieving world, completely under his control.

Second Seal, 3-4: War.

Compare Matt. 24:6,7a. The continual strife of nation against nation is another part of God's judgment.

Third Seal, 5-6: Famine

Matt. 24:7b leads us to expect famine next, and the balances confirm this. Cf. Ezek. 4:16,17. Measuring out one's food is a sign of time of famine. What's been happening in Sudan and Somalia is nothing new; and we can expect it to spread even further.

A Voice:

- Speaker: "In the midst of the four beasts"--cf. 5:6; 7:17. The Lamb, the one who is opening the seals, gives a special instruction to the horseman of famine.
- Message:
 - Specifies the degree of famine that the horseman is to institute. Extreme hardship, but not complete annihilation of the earth's population. (Death comes in the next seal.)
 - "Penny" = denarius. Matth. 20:2, a day's wages.
 - "Measure" = choenix, described in classical literature as a day's ration of grain.
 - The resulting prices are about 8-12 times greater than usual. One must spend everything one can earn for food.
 - "Hurt not the oil and the wine." The Lamb limits the extent of the judgment. Cf. Matt.

24:22, God shortens the days of Great Tribulation for the sake of the elect; so here, he limits the judgment. May we surmise that here too the reason is the elect? The horseman is to make sustenance costly, but not remove the means of joy and gladness (Psa. 104:15). The high cost of food will bring despair to the unbeliever, but the believer can always rejoice and praise God, even in want.

Fourth Seal, 7-8: Death and Hell

Death and Hell (Hades, the place of the dead: Bullinger suggests "Grave-dom") together: here they are authorized to range over the earth, but in 1:18 the Lord has already claimed dominion over them, and in 20:13,14 they are finally defeated.

The four judgments are from Ezek. 14:21, where LXX *qanatos* "death" represents Hebrew *deber* "pestilence, plague," mentioned in Matt. 24:7c. So far is this from being a tribulation judgment, that it is common even in the OT! Does not say that a quarter of the earth will die, but that they rule over a quarter of the earth. What we call the "third world," that does not have the technology to escape these.

9-11, Vision of the Martyrs

Fifth seal (martyred saints) fits three periods in the Discourse:

- the Great Tribulation
- the Days of Vengeance
- the Beginning of Sorrows (Matt. 24:9,10).

9, *their Sacrifice*

For the first time so far, John sees an altar in heaven. "Under the altar" is where the blood of the sacrifices was poured, Lev. 4:7; the lives of those who have been slain for the truth are here pictured as offerings to God. Compare 2 Tim. 4:6, "I am ready to be offered"; Phil. 2:17, "if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith ...". In both cases, the verb describes a drink-offering. *Application:* Keep clear the offerings that we make and those that the LJC makes on our behalf.

- He is our sin-offering, reconciling us to God in the first place, and our trespass offering, cleansing us when we stumble in our Christian life. We have nothing at all that we can bring, no merit or good works, to bridge the gap of sin.
- But we do have a role in sacrificial worship. We are to bring the sweet savor offerings: the whole burnt-offering (dedicating ourselves completely to the Lord's service, Rom. 12:1,2), and the various peace offerings (vow, thank, free-will, representing specific acts of worship; Heb. 13:15,16). The ultimate such sacrifice that we can make is our very lives. Psa. 116:15, "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."

10, *their Cry*

Contrast the Lord's cry (Luke 23:14), imitated by Stephen (Acts 7:60). Leads some (Bullinger) to

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suggest that we are in a different dispensation, comparable to that of the OT, in which we find the imprecatory psalms, and that such a prayer is inconceivable for the believer. Compare Luke 18:1-8, which (we are reminded) is also under Law, not Grace.

BUT the Lord's cry was ALSO under the Old Covenant; before the day of Pentecost. Stephen is most likely following the Lord, not trying to sort out dispensational distinctions. So the real puzzle is not why the martyrs here don't follow the Lord and Stephen, but why the Lord, under the old covenant, does not pray an Old Covenant prayer.

Conversely, the spirit of vengeance is not absent from the NT.

- Consider the instruction in Rom. 12:19, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but [rather] give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance [is] mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." We are not to seek vengeance, because that is God's prerogative. Vengeance is not wrong; but it must come from the correct source.
- 2 Thess. 1:6-10 encourages persecuted believers by anticipating God's future vengeance on their persecutors.
- 2 Tim. 4:14-16; Paul prays for divine vengeance on one malefactor, for forgiveness to others.

Conclusion: The dispensational distinction doesn't hold up. Under both covenants we find both kinds of behavior. We SHOULD NOT seek personal vengeance; but we SHOULD desire the vindication of God's name and ways. It is wrong to carry personal grudges; but it is equally wrong to excuse and tolerate this world's rebellion against God. Psa. 15:4, we are to despise vile persons.

11a, their Garments

Cf. 3:5, the mark of their triumph. While the ultimate vindication of God's ways must wait for a while, they have already received the badge of their victory.

11b, their Fellowservants and Brethren

Not "be fulfilled" (TR), but "finish [their course]" (MT). The sufferings of this present life are not an exception to be escaped wherever possible, but a program laid out by our loving God for our instruction and conformity to his purposes. The abuses of unbelievers are part of God's school for his children. He will bring just vengeance on the evildoers, but not until they have served their purpose of developing the character of his people.

Sixth seal and the return of Christ.

Matt. 24:29-30 places these signs "immediately after" the period called "Great Tribulation," and just before the return of Christ.

The language is drawn from numerous OT passages: Joel 2:31; 3:15 (sun and moon); Hag. 2:6 (shake heaven and earth); Isa. 13:10 (sun and moon); 34:4 (heavens rolled up as a scroll, presumably to let the Lord come through); Jer. 4:23-28. The stability of the earth, the clockwork motion of the stars, the light of sun and moon are the things that we consider most stable and reliable. When the Lord comes in

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judgment, even these stabilities are shaken and put in disarray. He demonstrates his place as the creator by his ability to shake the creation.

Everyone flees into caves from the Lord's presence. John is here following Isa. 2:19. When the world is dissolving around them, they can no longer deny the creator's power.

"Wrath of the Lamb" is a paradox; we can think of the wrath of God as judge, or perhaps the wrath of the Lion of Judah, but the Lamb is the picture of Christ slain to procure our forgiveness. They recognize him as the Lamb, yet even in the midst of his glorious appearance will not receive him as savior, and so can only fear his wrath. Contrast the attitude of elect Israel when the Lord returns, in Zech. 12:10.

Chapter 7: Interlude³

Overview

The inner rhythm of this chapter is built around a contrast between two groups; two locations; two sets of experiences.

| | 1-8 | 9-17 |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Groups ⁴ | Israel | "all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues" |
| Location | On earth, sealed from coming judgments | In heaven |
| Experience | Sealing to protect from harm | Martyrdom and fellowship with the Lord |

Purpose: The first five seals are not specific to the Great Tribulation, but include events characteristic of this entire age. The trumpets, to begin in ch. 8, describe the Great Tribulation, the time of the final great showdown between God and Antichrist. Before we enter that description, the Lord graciously instructs us concerning the provision he has made for his own children during this time. In summary, some (the 144K) will be protected from all that will take place; others (the great multitude) will be promoted through it to heaven.

1-8, The Sealing of the Earthly 144K

1, **The Coming Judgment:** Compare 8:7,8. The first two trumpets make the earth (including the plants) and the sea desolate. The first two bowls (16:2,3) have the same scope. The four winds that appear here are stored up to provide this judgment at the appropriate time.

2, **The Seal:** Provides protection from these judgments.

- OT foundation is Ezek. 9, where God marks out for protection from Nebuchadnezzar's armies the righteous in Jerusalem.
- The effect of this seal goes beyond the first and second trumpets. In 9:4, it protects them as well

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⁴ The contrast seems to be explicit, and thus it is hard to agree with the majority of commentators, including classical premils such as Alford, Ladd, and Payne, who see "Israel" as the church.

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against the demonic hordes of the fifth trumpet.

- The sealed group reappears in 14:1, still on earth (at Mount Zion, listening to a voice from heaven in 14:2). May be a glimpse at the millennial kingdom; if so, shows that this group survives all the effects of the Great Tribulation.

3-8, **The Group Protected**

As noted, the explicit contrast with the multinational group in 9-17 makes it easiest to understand this group as elect Jews, and there is no reason in the text not to. There will one day be a great turning to Christ among the Jews; Rom. 11:26; Zech. 12:10 (which more precisely identifies the time as the culmination of international opposition to Israel). This group of 144K are specifically protected so that they can come through all these tribulations. (May not be saved at the moment they are sealed.)

This group does not exhaust the saved among Israel. The "great multitude" in 9-17, because it includes "all nations," has the other saved Israelites, as well as gentiles. Compare ch. 14, where the 144K are further described as virgins, who have not experienced Levitical defilement through conjugal relations.

The tribe of Dan, not mentioned in this list, is a specific example of the focus here. (Ephraim is not named explicitly, but as the son with the birthright, Gen. 43, bears Joseph's name in 7:8.) Judg. 18 with Deut. 29:18-21 perhaps explains Dan's omission: Dan was the first tribe as a tribe to turn to idolatry, and thus does not receive this explicit protection during the GT. (Doesn't mean that they can't be saved, and in Ezek. 48 they have a portion in the millennial kingdom. But they are not sealed against the ravages of Antichrist.)

9-17, The Worship of the Heavenly Multitude

There has been only one reference to the throne since ch. 5; in 6:16, expressing the terror of sinners as the Lord draws near. Now we're back in heaven, back in the throne room; seven references to the throne in this section.

9-12, **The Scene**

9-10, The Multitude

- 9a, Composition: Every nation, as in 5:9. Direct contrast to the emphasis on Israel in the first part of the chapter.
- 9b, Appearance:
 - Standing--position of service.
 - White robes: 6:11 (only other occurrence of the phrase in Rev, besides here and 7:12). Mark of the martyrs.
 - Palm Branches: symbol of victorious rejoicing. See commentaries for references from Maccabees. The most familiar example is John 12:13, the Lord's triumphal entry, and perhaps the reference here includes an allusion to this event, with the martyrs acknowledging Christ's place as King.
- 10, Worship: The sense of the idiom is, "Salvation belongs to" They recognize that in spite of all that they have endured, he has saved them. Notice their emphasis: not "we are saved" (center

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on us), but "he saves" (center on God).

11-12, The Response: The host introduced in ch. 5 respond to this doxology.

- "Amen" is used here in its most common biblical sense, not to end a prayer, but to agree with what someone else has said.
- They amplify what the martyrs have said. God not only possesses salvation, but also these other attributes.
- Superficially, it seems that they are ascribing more to the Father than the martyrs did to the Son in 7:12. However, the same heavenly host has already ascribed every one of these attributes to the Lamb in 5:12,13 (see table below). They mention only God, not to exclude the Lamb, but because they include him in the category "God."

| | Ascribed to the Father | Ascribed to the Son |
|------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| glory <1391> | 4:11;5:13;7:12;19:1 | 5:12,13 |
| honour <5092> | 4:11;5:13;7:12;19:1 | 5:12,13 |
| power <1411> | 4:11;7:12;19:1 | 5:12 |
| riches <4149> | | 5:12 |
| wisdom <4678> | 7:12 | 5:12 |
| strength <2479> | 7:12 (might) | 5:12 |
| blessing <2129> | 5:13;7:12 | 5:12,13 |
| power <2904> | 5:13 | 5:13 |
| salvation <4991> | 7:10;19:1 | 7:10 |
| tksgiving <2169> | 7:12 | |

13-17, **The Interpretation:** Daniel (7:16) and Zechariah (1:9) would sometimes ask for explanations. Here the question comes from one of the elders. Just in case John doesn't think to ask for more detail, the elder wants to be sure that the point isn't missed. He describes three points that help us to understand the heavenly experience.

- Their Qualifications
 - Their works: They have come out of the (definite article; only place) GT. The parallel with 6:9-11 shows that their exit has been by way of death. 2:10, "be faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."
 - Yet we must not think that this faithfulness merits salvation. Their garments are white, not through their own works, but "by the blood of the lamb." Their martyrdom results from their salvation, but does not cause it.
- Their Worship: The positive side of heaven: what is there.
 - Outer members emphasize their continued contact with God:
 - "they are before the throne of God"

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- he "tabernacles among them"
- The center describes their activity in this position. "They serve him"--*latreuw*, indicating the sacred service of a priest. Constantly occupied with worshipping him.
- Their Comfort: The negative side: what isn't there.
 - No hunger, because the Lamb feeds them (lit. "shepherds them"--the lamb is also our shepherd!)
 - No thirst, because the Lamb provides fresh flowing springs of water (not stale cistern water)
 - No discomfort; on the contrary, the Lord comforts them over any past pain.

The Believer and the Wrath of God

Because some but not all are sealed, we can conclude that the unsealed suffer the things from which the sealed are protected. How does this square with the promise of 1 Thes. 5:9 that "God has not appointed us unto wrath"?

Two kinds of things go on during the GT: God's judgments on unbelievers, and the Antichrist's opposition to God. The latter is what generates the martyrs. We will never suffer the wrath of God; believers in every age can expect persecution from those motivated by the spirit of Antichrist.

Are all believers exempt from the various judgments of the GT? The sealing in the first part of the chapter protects from the judgments on the earth and sea as well as from the demonic hordes, suggesting that unsealed believers may suffer some of these effects. Believers do sometimes suffer loss through natural disasters. Yet in their case these represent, not God's wrath, but his loving discipline to purge out sin and render them more like Christ. One and the same event has two very different meanings, depending on the relation in which the recipient stands to God. To the unbeliever it is well-deserved wrath; to the believer, a welcome token of the Lord's loving care.