

Unsealing and Sealing: Revelation 6-7

Covenant Church
Sunday, May 19, 2019
Zack Phillips, Pastor

Rev 6:1 – 8:1 (NRSV)

^{6:1} Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!” ² I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

³ When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, “Come!” ⁴ And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.

⁵ When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, “Come!” I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, ⁶ and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!”

⁷ When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, “Come!” ⁸ I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.

⁹ When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; ¹⁰ they cried out with a loud voice, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” ¹¹ They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

¹² When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴ The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”

^{7:1} After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on earth or sea or against any tree. ² I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, ³ saying, “Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads.”

⁴ And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel:

⁵ From the tribe of Judah twelve thousand sealed,
from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand,
⁶ from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand,
⁷ from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand,
⁸ from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand sealed.

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.
¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

^{8:1} When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

I. Unsealing

Symbol	Meaning	Basis
A white horse whose rider has a bow and a crown (6:2)	Wars of conquest?	Parthia, to the east of Rome, had often conquered it: white was a sacred color of Parthians and the bow was their characteristic weapon. ¹
	Christ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christ will appear on the white horse in Rev 19 • Conquering and crown generally have Christian connotations • Unlike the other three riders, this one does not bring death and destruction
A red horse whose rider has a large sword and is allowed to take peace from the earth so people slaughter one another (6:4)	War	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removal of peace • Sword (not “from the mouth”) • Slaughtering
A black horse whose rider holds a pair of scales whose meaning is given by a voice (6:5-6)	Famine	A day’s wage could usually buy much more food; these are highly inflated prices that would mean workers live at subsistence levels. ²
A pale green horse whose rider is Death (with Hades) who is given authority over a fourth of the earth and is allowed to kill (6:8)	Aftermath of war (sickness, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth” • The sickly, dead-flesh color of the horse
The ones under the altar, with white robes, who were slaughtered for the word of God and their testimony (6:9-11)	Those persecuted for their Christian faith	Revelation interprets it for us
Earthquake + blackened sun + bloody moon + falling stars + vanishing sky + removed mountains and islands (6:12-13)	The “evil of natural catastrophe” (Peterson)	All images of Creation coming undone in catastrophic ways: see Hag 2:6-9; Amos 8:7-8 (earthquake); Joel 2:30-32 (blackened sun and bloody moon); Mark 13:24-25 (blackened sun and falling stars); Isa 34:4 (sky disappearing and stars withering like figs)

¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 58.

² See Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 58; Charles H. Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994: 31.

Four angels at the four corners of earth holding back the four winds of the earth (7:1)	Winds of destruction	A fairly common OT image (e.g., Jer 4:11-12; 18:17; Isa 41:16)
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“[T]he evil of natural catastrophe” is a “wider” “evil” than the ones before it, according to Peterson, because “nature is more inclusive than history, including animals as well as people, primitive tribes as well as sophisticated civilizations, the innocent along with the guilty. A pogrom is selective, an earthquake promiscuous. Persecution is focused, catastrophe indiscriminate.”³

“War is the human condition. To be human is to be at war.” —Eugene Peterson⁴

II. Sealing

Symbol	Meaning	Basis
a seal on their foreheads	God’s protection by His Spirit	A fairly common biblical image: see quotations below
144,000 sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel (7:4)	<i>all</i> of God’s people, i.e., Israel <i>and</i> the church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative logic • Same “hearing”-“looking” dynamic as in chapter 5
Great multitude from every nation that no one could count, clothed in white, with palm branches (7:9)		
Hour-hour silence in heaven (8:1)	Preparation for New Creation?	4 Ezra 7:30: And the world shall be turned back to primeval silence for seven days, as it was at the first beginnings; so that no one shall be left. ⁵
	Chance for repentance?	Broader reading of the book

Ezek 9:3b-6a The LORD called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his side; 4 and said to him, “Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and *put a mark on the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.*” To the others he said in my hearing, “Pass through the city after him, and kill; your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. Cut down old men, young men and young women, little children and women, but touch no one who has the mark. And begin at my sanctuary.”

Eph 1:13-14 In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were *marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit*; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.

³ Peterson, *Reverse Thunder*, 80.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988: 74.

⁵ An observation made by, among others, Talbert, *The Apocalypse*, 37.

2 Cor 1:21-22 But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, *by putting his seal on us* and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment.

Those who are faithful will be “preserved *through* (not *from!*) the great persecution that is about to be unleashed upon them like a mighty devastating wind” (Boring).⁶

“Chapter 7:4-14 uses the same device as was used in 5:5-6: that of contrasting what John *hears* (7:4) and what he *sees* (7:9).”⁷

“Thus, just as 5:5-6 depicts Jesus Christ as the Messiah who has won a victory, but has done so by sacrificial death, not by military might, so 7:4-14 depicts his followers as the people of the Messiah who share in his victory, but do so similarly, by sacrificial death rather than by military violence.”⁸

	Revelation 5 ⁹	Revelation 7
Heard...	5:5a Then one of the elders <i>said to me</i> , “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered...”	7:2 And <i>I heard</i> the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel...
...A militaristic image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lion as image of aggression • Davidic Messiah as militaristic leader • Language of “conquering” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Judah listed first (like “Lion of Judah” in 5:5) • “purely nationalistic image” (“the army of all Israel... mustered... to defeat the Gentile oppressors of Israel”) • A census (“always a reckoning of the military strength of the nation”)
Saw...	5:6a Then <i>I saw</i> between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered...	7:9a After this <i>I looked</i> , and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages...

⁶ M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989: 128 (quoted in Talbert, *The Apocalypse*, 35) (emphasis mine).

⁷ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. New Testament Theology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993: 76.

⁸ Bauckham, *Theology*, 77.

⁹ This chart is based on the observations and arguments of Bauckham, *Theology*, 77-78.