

*Hope Through Suffering*

**Revelation 6:1-8:5**

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Sometimes we may go to the doctor to get relief from a particular symptom. Or we go to the dentist because of trouble with one tooth. Or we go to a counselor or pastor to get help with one problem in life. But then the doctor wants to review our health history and even find out about our family's health history. The dentist may start fiddling around with other teeth. The counselor or pastor starts looking at deeper issues in our lives.

Why do we have to dig up all that old stuff? It's uncomfortable to talk about or deal with. But it's necessary. If we don't lay out the problems fully, real healing can't happen. Unless the world's ills are brought out, shown for what they are, and allowed to do their worst, they can't be overthrown. "Unless the four horsemen ride out and do what they have to do, the scroll cannot be read. The victory of the lion-lamb" will be incomplete (N. T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* 60).

Reading Revelation 6 and many of the sections that follow is uncomfortable. We've just joined in the magnificent songs of praise to God the Creator and to Jesus, the Lion of Judah who is also the Lamb that was slain. We've seen that God is worthy of all praise. We've been caught up in heavenly worship. We might think everything's o.k. now.

But then we turn to chapter 6 and we see evil and destruction still running over the world. There are even more strange sights and sounds that symbolize the world's rebellion and evil and God's response. All of this is still meant to encourage us and give us hope, but it may be hard to see how that can be.

We saw that Jesus, the Lamb of God, who gave his life to redeem us is the one who is worthy, the one who deserves to break the seals and open the scroll that contains God's purpose for creation and God's plan to overthrow and defeat what rebels against God's good purpose. But breaking the seals also reveals the extent of the rebellion, the evil.

There are two more series of seven "judgments" in Revelation. The opening of the seals leads right into the seven trumpets that again expose

evil and announce judgment on it (8:2-9:21; 11:15-19). There's a break between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals. There's also a break or an interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpets (10:1-11:14). Then, following several other scenes, there's a series of seven "bowls" of God's wrath, similar to the plagues that were poured out on Egypt (Rev 15-16).

Remember, seven represents completeness. These three series of sevens expose the full extent of evil, of rebellion against God's kingdom, of Fallen Babylon's nature. And they reveal the fullness of God's dealing with all that and putting an end to it.

N. T. Wright gives a good summary of these scenes and their place in the whole of Revelation. He compares these series of visions to writing music. In music you can have several lines that all happen at the same time. With words you have to say things in order. The sevenfold sequences of seals, trumpets, and bowls aren't chronological. They show the fullness and intensity of one reality.

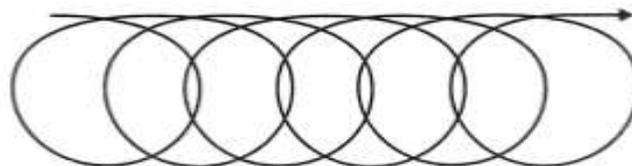
#### **[An Overview of Revelation**

**(from Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* 38-40)**

Looking at previous attempts to make sense of the book should rightly make us cautious about claiming to have found yet another key to unlocking the mysteries contained in Revelation, but a number of points are worth keeping in mind as we embark on a journey through the visions that John of Patmos included in his book.

One basic insight is that we do well to take Revelation as a whole, as a book with its own integrity. Some...approaches...assume that verses of the Bible are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and that our task is to put pieces from various books together to create a complete picture. To take Revelation as a whole means following its message from the introduction in Revelation 1 to the final blessing at the end of Revelation 22, instead of jumping from Daniel 9 to 1 Thessalonians 4 and then to Revelation 6, etc.

...Reading Revelation as a whole shows that the book moves in a non-linear way. ...An outline of the book looks like a spiral, with each loop consisting of a series of visions: seven messages to the churches (Rev. 1-3), seven seals (Rev. 4-7), seven trumpets (Rev. 8-11), unnumbered visions (Rev. 12-15), seven plagues (Rev. 15-19), and more unnumbered visions (Rev. 19-22). Visions celebrating the triumph of God occur at the end of each cycle (4:1-11; 7:1-17; 11:15-19; 15:1-4; 19:1-10; 21:1-22:5). This pattern...looks something like this:



Those who read Revelation as a whole encounter visions that alternatively threaten and assure them. With increasing intensity the visions at the bottom of the spiral threaten the readers' sense of security by confronting them with horsemen that represent conquest, violence, hardship, and death; by portents in heaven, earth and sea; and by seemingly insuperable adversaries who oppose those who worship God and Christ. Nevertheless, each time the clamor of conflict becomes unbearable, listeners are transported into the presence of God, the Lamb, and the heavenly chorus. These visions appear at the top of the spiral. Threatening visions and assuring visions function differently, but they serve the same end, which is that listeners might continue to trust in God and remain faithful to God.

Revelation is designed to unmask false sources of security while beckoning readers to join the heavenly host in singing praise to God and the Lamb. ...The many songs and hymns that are based on worship scenes from Revelation continue to be sung in Christian communities around the world, enabling many—including those who have never read the book—to *experience* its message with compelling immediacy. Readers will encounter many threatening images in Revelation, but those who keep the musical scenes in mind will not lose sight of the book's goal. Moving through kaleidoscopic cycles of visions can be confusing, but readers who keep the strains of the "Hallelujah Chorus" in the backs of their minds will remember where the story is going.

...take Revelation contextually, as a book written by "John, to the seven churches that are in Asia" (1:4). Accordingly, instead of first asking how Revelation relates to the headlines in today's newspaper, we will ask how it relates to the situation of the Christians of John's own time. This approach is not designed to keep Revelation safely confined to the first century, so that modern readers can be protected from its message. Rather, it recognizes that Revelation is not a coded collection of secrets that will finally become intelligible at the end of time, for from the beginning it has been an open book that was designed to communicate with Christians living on earth. Looking at ways in which the book addressed the situation of its first readers invites modern readers to explore ways in which it continues to address our situations today.

**from N. T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone***

We should not suppose that this sevenfold sequence of 'seals' being opened is supposed to take place *before* the subsequent sequences of the trumpets (chapters 8-11) and the bowls of wrath (chapter 16). Rather, each of the sequences—and the material in between, too—is a fresh angle of vision on the same highly complex reality. If we look at the problems and pains of the world from *this* angle, God's answer is to draw out the arrogant wickedness of humans to its full extent and show that he is bringing his people safely through (ch. 7). If we look at those same problems and pains from the *next* angle of vision, God's answer is to allow the forces of destruction to do their worst, so that he can then establish his kingdom fully and finally over the world (chs 8-11). And if we take a deep breath and begin the story again from yet a third angle of vision (chs 12 and 13), we see the full depth and horror of the problem, to which God's answer will be to inflict on the rebellious world the equivalent of the plagues of Egypt, before finally rescuing his people and judging the dark powers that have for so long enslaved them (chs 12-19).

Then and only then can the darkest power of all be dealt with (ch 20). And then and only then can the new heaven and the new earth be established, without any fear that there may be lingering sicknesses still unhealed, buried sadnesses still to produce grief. Revelation 6-20 is not what we wanted to hear, just as the news from the doctor or the pastor [about our sickness or sin] may not be what we wanted to hear. But it is what we must hear if the world is to be healed.]

I once read a novel where a king was faced with threats from enemies outside his realm and traitors within his kingdom. It wasn't obvious who all the enemies were. So, in order to draw them out and get them to expose themselves, and then finally come together in one place where he could deal with them all at once, the king made himself appear weak and vulnerable. The traitors and enemies became more bold and open in their attacks and then did come together for one great battle—where the king and his supporters defeated them (Stephen R. Donaldson, *Mordant's Need: The Mirror of Her Dreams* and *A Man Rides Through*).

God in Jesus Christ humbles himself, makes himself weak and vulnerable. At the cross, all the enemies of God's kingdom and of true humanity came at Jesus. They did their worst and he exposed them and defeated them through the cross and resurrection. They still keep fighting, but their defeat is already sure. Revelation is showing that the forces of evil are still at large. But it also shows how they were and are defeated by Jesus' self-sacrifice and by his people's faithfulness.

So there's big-picture, overview, kind of stuff. Now let's see what happens here in chapter 6. We'll see the first six seals opened, we'll skip the interlude (ch 7—we'll look at it next week) and jump to the seventh seal (8:1-5).

The Lamb who is at the center of God's throne is Jesus in his self-sacrificing love. But this love is also holy and brings judgment on evil. The scroll of God's purpose and plan is sealed with seven seals. As Jesus opens each one, amazing things happen. The first four seals are similar. Each one introduces a rider on a different colored horse. These are the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." They represent various ways that humans misuse the freedom God gives us. They show ways that evil works in the world.

The rider on the white horse symbolizes warriors who conquer. In the time Revelation was written, the eastern edge of the Roman Empire was bordered by the Parthians, whose soldiers were deadly archers. That may be in the background of this picture. The rider on the red horse symbolizes war and violence that people do to each other. The rider on the black horse

symbolizes famine and economic injustice. The rider on the sickly green horse symbolizes death.

These riders are *permitted* to act. They are *given* power. And they are *limited* in what they can do. God is still in charge, even when these kinds of evils are at large in the world. Revelation assumes that God is the all-powerful absolute ruler of the world. But because God gave humans free will, we can misuse the portion of power entrusted to us. That doesn't make God helpless or frustrated. God still rules. One way God shows his power is to let the misuse of power and freedom bring on suffering and disaster. God doesn't approve of famine and death and hell, but they follow if people persist in resisting God's rule (Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code* 57, 58).

These four riders portray conflict and violence and some of their results. We see them in the world today. Last week, a school shooting in Kentucky made the news. Bad as that news was, it was also reported that this was the *eleventh* school shooting so far this year—and it's still January! That kind of violence shows the misuse of power and freedom God allows. It may also show the hopelessness of people who are caught up in the world of rebellion against God.

Also last week I listened to an interview with a man who's a former Neo-Nazi, Skinhead, White Supremacist. He joined the movement when he was 14, not so much because he was racist, but this group gave him a place to belong. He had felt a lot of anger at his parents and alienation from people in his school and this group accepted him and gave him a sense of power. He got caught up in this movement, with all the hate and violence that are part of it. After eight years, he left the white power movement and now, many years later, he helps others leave and learn how to relate to different people.

The change started as he was part of a gang beating up a young African-American man. The man was on the ground and this guy was kicking him. But then, his eyes locked with his victim's eyes, and he felt a surprising empathy.

Another part of the change in his life was receiving compassion from people he least deserved it from when he least deserved it. Music was a big

part of his life and he opened a record store to sell white power music. But to stay in the community and make a living, he knew he also needed to sell other kinds of music. And he started getting other kinds of customers—African-Americans, Jews, and other people he was supposed to hate. At first, he was kind of standoffish with these customers. But then he started talking with them and interacting with them. He explains:

In fact, I had never in my life engaged in a meaningful dialogue with the people that I thought I hated, and it was these folks who showed me empathy when I least deserved it, and they were the ones that I least deserved it from. I started to recognize that I had more in common with them than the people I had surrounded myself for eight years with—that these people, that I thought I hated, took it upon themselves to see something inside of me that I didn't even see myself, and it was because of that connection that I was able to humanize them and that destroyed the demonization and the prejudice that was happening inside of me.

<https://www.npr.org/2018/01/18/578745514/a-former-neo-nazi-explains-why-hate-drew-him-in-and-how-he-got-out>

So, violence runs rampant. But God's already dealing with it and will someday put an end to it.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been. (Rev 6:9-11)

People whose lives are shaped by God's word and who tell about it are a threat to the rebellious world. In John's day, some Christians were

being executed for their faith. One of the messages to the churches mentions a faithful witness named Antipas who was put to death in that city (2:13). Off and on and at various places in the Roman Empire, Christians were persecuted and killed. Some say that more Christians were killed in the Twentieth Century than in the rest of Christian history combined. Still today, there are places in the world where it's dangerous to believe and witness about Jesus.

But all of those who lay down their lives for the Lord are in a safe place. Their sacrifice helps spread the word and bring the powerful love of God to bear on the world. Their spirits are clothed in white robes of righteousness as they await the end. They continue to be joined by others who are faithful unto death.

What does our faith in Jesus cost us? What are we willing to sacrifice to be faithful and to bear witness to the Lord?

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?" (6:12-17)

This brings us right up to the end of all things. This part of the vision foreshadows God's full and complete victory over the rebellious order. Everyone who's not part of God's kingdom fears facing the Lord and they try to hide from God. "As the action of God in Christ disrupts the whole structure of their fallen order, the citizens of that fallen order attempt to hide themselves from God in, beneath, and behind the broken pieces of

their fallen world" (Robert Mulholland, *Journey Through the Bible*, vol. 16: *Revelation 44*).

The big question here is, "Who can stand on the day of God's wrath?" We'll see the answer in chapter 7, but I'll give you a spoiler: it's those who belong to the Lord, who receive his salvation and follow the Lamb.

Now let's jump to the seventh seal.

When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake. (8:1-5)

This throne room of God that John sees in his vision is also the temple. It has features like the temple in Jerusalem. The One who rules is worthy of worship. We worship the One who reigns.

Remember, earlier we saw that the prayers of God's people was the incense that went up before God. We see that image again here. The prayers of God's people go up before God. There's silence in heaven for a time. All the praise and worship and noisy activity stop for a bit. Could it be that it all halts so the prayers of God's people can be heard? At the very least, the silence gives us pause before the next vision of judgment.

But the prayers are part of the judgment. An angel holds the incense and prayers in a censer, a golden container for burning incense. Then he hurls the censer to the earth. And there's all kinds of noise and disruption again.

Some of what's going on here is that God's people are brought into God's presence through Christ's sacrifice. But God's people are also thrust out into the world to be agents of God's presence in the world, in the middle of the rebellious order.

The thunders, voices, lightnings, and the earthquake all represent the presence of God, and especially God's disruptive presence, which "shakes" the rebellious order to its very foundations. The sacrificial prayers of the saints "release" the presence of God in the midst of the rebellious order. (Mulholland 47)

Our prayers go up before God, but they also become a way for God's presence to be made known in the world. Depending on our response to God and our relationship with God, God's presence can be comforting and energizing or it can be threatening.

The question now is, do we live as God's people, citizens of New Jerusalem, trusting God's grace and mercy, being faithful witnesses? Or do we live as part of the rebellious order, Fallen Babylon, rejecting God's grace and mercy? When we finally see God's face, will we be filled with love and joy and enter in or will we turn away with fear and hatred? Revelation keeps putting that choice before us.