



BREAKING THE 7 SEALS

Revelation 6.1-8.2

Intro John may hold the distinction for being the only person to cry in heaven (5.4). Ok, that's being a little cute, but we should be impressed with what John experienced when in a vision he was called into heaven (4.1-2). Yes, he witnessed a glorious scene, a scene meant to comfort God's people, but when it was discovered that none were found worthy to open the scroll which God held, John descended into despair. But worthy is the lamb to take the scroll and break its seals (5.5,9). As we've noted previously, the scroll would seem to represent a revelation of how God's will would be brought about. Only Jesus, the Lion of Judah and the slain lamb, could open the scroll, i.e. bring about the fulfillment of God's will.

In this lesson we will study the events that transpired as each seal was broken. The images contained in these passages have led to rampant speculation by some, resulting in much confusion of the Biblical text. However, this passage can be understood and to aid our understanding we will look at the 5th seal first. Doing so will aid our interpretation of the seals before and after.

The 5th Seal: Martyred Saints (6.9-11)

1. The interpretation of this seal is straightforward. Just as the Lamb had been slain (5.6), now we behold those have been slain for following Him. They had been slain "because" they followed His word.
2. The fact that these souls are found beneath the altar has significance. As Hailey explains, "In the law it was said that the life 'is in the blood' (Lev. 17:11,14; Deut. 12:23) and that the blood of the sacrifices was to be poured out at 'the base' of the altar (Lev. 4:7,18,30). Therefore, when the blood was poured out, it was the life that was being offered." These had made the ultimate sacrifice for God, their lives, and thus they were holy to Him.
3. These are calling on God to avenge their blood (vs. 10). In doing so they echo the plight of numerous saints in the Old Testament (Psalm 6.3; 13.1f; Jeremiah 47.6; Habakkuk 1.2; etc.) We should not interpret this as blood-lust, but rather a vindication of the cause for which they died and the fulfillment of God's promise to subdue His foes (Psalm 2).

4. In answer, they are given white robes signifying their status as conquerors (see 3.5), but then told that it would be a while yet before God's vengeance would be executed. Even more, there were still more saints that must be killed first! (vs. 11)

The First Four Seals: Gospel Proclaimed, But Persecution Follows (6.1-8)

1. Having firmly identified the 5th seal, we can now identify the previous 4 seals. This is not too difficult if we understand that what is occurring is progressive, that is the first 4 seals lead up to the martyrs calling on God to avenge them in seal 5.
2. Seal 1: The White Horse & Its Rider (6.1-2)
 - a. While some interpreters see this as representing an earthly army, this does not fit with the overall message of the book.
 - b. This image is clearly defined as Jesus in 19.11-16. His bow is a sign of strength (see Psalm 7.12) and His crown indicates His victory (14.14).
 - c. While we've already noted the fact that Jesus overcame (see 5.5), it would seem that the victory described here has to do with the proclamation of the gospel. It is by the gospel that His people are saved and that His enemies are defeated. It is for the gospel that His people were being martyred (vs. 9).
3. Seals 2-4: Persecution (6.3-8)
 - a. Jesus told His disciple on several occasions that they would be persecuted for following Him (see Matthew 10.21,34-39; John 15.18). As Paul said, "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2Timothy 3.12). The three horses and their riders which followed Christ would seem to represent various forms of persecution.
 - b. The red horse and its rider (vss. 3-4) would represent physical persecution of God's people. The use of the word "slay" is significant as it is the word used for the Lamb (5.6) and for His martyrs (vs. 9).
 - c. The black horse and its rider (vss. 5-6) represents economic persecution. A measure (quart) of wheat could feed one person for a day. Given that this modest measure of food cost a day's wage (denarius), a man could barely afford food for himself, much less a family! Also significant is that luxury items (oil and wine) are not affected. "The Christians who refused to compromise his conscience by sustaining membership in a pagan guild, as at Thyatira (2:18ff), or bow to the emperor's image in worship, as at Pergamum (2:12ff), or be injured in his occupation by Jewish influence, as at Smyrna (2:8ff), would be hard-pressed to find work whereby he could earn a living," (Hailey).
 - d. The pale horse and its rider (vss. 7-8) is identified as death, with Hades following. Death would represent the state of the physical body while Hades

represents the abode of the soul at death. It is unclear if this seal represents general conditions on the earth where many suffer and die, including Christians, or if this is a general summary of what was happening to God's people. Regardless, it continues the bleak picture of the previous two seals.

4. Having now seen the going forth of the gospel (seal 1) and the resulting persecution (seals 2-4), the cry of the martyrs (seal 5) makes perfect sense.

The Sixth Seal: God Begins To Reply (6.12-17)

1. The Lord had told His martyrs that they should rest until the persecution is completed (vs. 11). However, that doesn't mean the Lord wouldn't act. The 6th seal begins to show the Lord's response.
2. That this response is a judgment from the Lord is evident from the world's response in vs. 16, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb." God was responding!
3. Remember that this section contains apocalyptic language, language that is both highly symbolic and intended to assault the senses. While some read this and think of the earth's destruction, they fail to remember that this language is prevalent in the Old Testament (see Isaiah 13.10,13; 29.6; 50.3; Joel 2.31).
4. The point of the language is that nothing can withstand the Lord's fury. Not the sky, or mountains or islands, much less the kings and rulers of the earth. None can stand in the great day of the Lord's wrath! Except...

The Answer To The Question, "Who Is Able To Stand?" (7.1-17)

1. Chapter 6 ended with the Lord and the Lamb poised to avenge their people and execute their wrath on the earth that had persecuted them. However, before that occurs there is an interlude, a time when we see who exactly will be able to stand when the Lord executes His wrath.
2. Four angels are sent to the four corners of the earth to hold back the four winds. The would would represent God's judgment (see Jeremiah 49.36; 51.1-2), a judgment that was going to come on the whole world. But the Lord is delaying this judgment "until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads" (vs. 3).
 - a. "A biblical seal indicates several things: a) protection against tampering (Mt. 27:66); b) ownership (Song of Sol. 8:6); and c) certification (Esth. 3:12). All of these meanings are true of Christians who are under God's protection, purchased by the blood of Christ, and certified by the Spirit to be the sons of God (Eph. 1:13; Rom. 8:16)," (Harkrider).
 - b. Compare with Ezekiel 9.1-11.
3. This is the answer to the question in 6.17. Who is able to stand? Only those sealed by the Lord!

4. Those sealed are numbered in 7.4-8. 144,000 should not be taken as literal, but a multiple of God's covenant people (12*12*1000). "Twelve, the religious number multiplied by itself and then by one thousand, indicating fullness or completeness, represents the total number of saints on earth at any given time," (Hailey). They are described as the tribes of Israel because they are the spiritual Israel (Romans 2.28f; 9.6; Galatians 6.15f; Philippians 3.3).
5. Our attention is then drawn to heaven, where a great multitude is present (7.9-17). These are identified as those who've come out of the tribulation and are now receiving a reward (vss. 14-17). These have overcome! And those on earth, those still experiencing the tribulation, can know that a whole multitude of their brethren are now in heaven. They can know that their identification with the Lamb, having His seal on their foreheads, will mean they too will be part of the great multitude. "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

The Seventh Seal: The Seven Trumpets (8.1-2)

1. The seventh seal is broken, and rather than the climax of the action, we have silence. And then seven trumpets are given to seven angels.
2. God's wrath is about to break forth, but before that a call to silence. "Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord; for He is aroused from His holy habitation" (Zechariah 2.13).