

REV. 4:1–7:17

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IV. Heavenly Vision (4:1-11)

A. Relation to the messages to the churches – Although the specifics differed, all the churches addressed in chapters 2 and 3 had been urged to remain faithful to God and to his Son Jesus. In being told to repent and to endure or overcome, they were being told to put their trust in the unseen reality rather than be lured or frightened away by the physical reality. John is now given a vision of heaven, a vision of the God who controls all history and of the Son who accomplishes his plan.

B. The Vision (4:1-11)

1. Prelude (4:1) – John looks and sees a door into heaven, into God's dwelling place, that is open. This is reminiscent of Ezek. 1:1, "the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God." He hears the voice of the Lord Jesus telling him, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." We know it is Jesus who is speaking from the prior identification in 1:10. He is going to show John what God is going to do in the future, what must take place after this. And since God is behind it, it *must* take place; there is no thwarting the purposes of God.

2. Vision of God (4:2-6a)

a. At once John enters into a Spirit-sent visionary experience in which God reveals his mysteries. Now I suspect that if you asked John, he would say, like Paul in 2 Cor. 12:2, that he did not know whether his body actually accompanied him on his trip into heaven. He in some sense went up and was shown heaven but the precise mechanics of that vision are not given to us and probably were not even given to John.

b. Upon entering heaven, John sees a throne with one seated on it.

(1) Now we do not talk a lot about thrones in our culture, but in John's day, and until quite recently, a throne was an immediately understood symbol of the sovereign majesty of the king; it signified both rule and judgment. And here we have the *heavenly* throne, the throne that is above *all* earthly thrones, the rule that is superior to *all* earthly rule.

(2) Whatever tyrant may be raging at the moment – from Domitian to Pol Pot – whatever injustice any human authority is inflicting – from a violent parent to a racist cop – *his* is not the last word. There is a throne that is above his, and the abuser one day will answer to the one who sits on it.

(3) And the one who sits on it is, of course, "the Lord God Almighty," as noted in v. 8. The throne of God is often referred to in Scripture (e.g., Isa. 6:1; Ps. 47:8) and in other Jewish literature. Rather than name him, John simply describes the splendor with which he is portrayed.

(a) He has the appearance of brilliantly colored precious jewels, usually translated as jasper and carnelian. Carnelian is a fiery red stone, and unlike its modern counterpart, this jasper probably was translucent. The God who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16) is here represented as a sparkle of colored light.

(b) Now to appreciate the awesomeness of this depiction you have to remember that this was before electric light shows and computer graphics. This was stunning. God is communicating the fact he is the ultimate in majesty in a picture that spoke powerfully to a first-century audience. It shouted GLORY to them, and that is its message to us. As one commentator says (Boxall, 84), the use of these stones in John's description "evokes the dazzling splendour of the divine presence, a scene before which human beings can only bow down in adoration and worship."

(4) Adding to the brilliance of the image is the fact a rainbow that resembles an emerald and is shaped like a halo encircles the throne. It may resemble an emerald by being a spectrum of green colors or by being the colors of a normal rainbow that are tinted green. But clearly it is a sign of God's supreme majesty. The normal splendor of the rainbow is heightened by its association with an emerald, another precious jewel.

c. As the vision continues, we see that outside the emerald-like rainbow that is encircling God's throne there is another circle, this one of 24 other thrones, and seated on these thrones are 24 beings called "elders." Throughout Revelation they are pictured as falling down before God in worship (5:14; 11:16; 19:4), and adoration and praise are continuously on their lips (4:11; 5:9-10; 11:17-18; 19:4).

(1) Now with many commentators, I am convinced that these elders are an important order of angelic or heavenly beings. They are part of the heavenly court that is alluded to in some of the Psalms (see, e.g., Ps. 29:1, 89:6-7, 103:19-21, 148:1-2). Let me quickly run through some of the reasons for thinking they are heavenly beings.

(a) Jewish literature of the time, especially apocalyptic literature, referred to powerful angelic or spiritual beings by the terms rulers, authorities, powers, and thrones (*Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 748-749; *The Colossian Syncretism*, 252-255), so thrones and crowns certainly would not be out of place in a depiction of heavenly beings. Paul also uses these terms to refer to spiritual beings (Col. 1:16, 2:15; Eph. 1:21, 3:10, 6:12), but his references often, if not always, are to hostile powers (see also, 1 Pet. 3:22).

(b) In several places in the N.T. angels are described as wearing white clothing (Mat. 28:3; Jn. 20:12; Acts 1:10).

(c) Throughout the Book of Revelation these elders perform what in Jewish apocalyptic literature are common angelic functions. Specifically, in 5:8 they, with the four living creatures, present the prayers of the saints to God, and in 5:5 and 7:13 they explain or interpret things (see Aune, 291; Poythress, 103; Beale, 323).

(d) Revelation 5:8-10 seems clearly to distinguish these creatures from the redeemed. And if they are not part of the redeemed, it seems pretty clear that they are some kind of heavenly being.

(e) And finally, it is possible (though certainly disputed) that the term "elder" in Isa. 24:23 refers to angelic beings.

(2) So I am convinced these elders are some kind of angelic or heavenly beings. The white garments they are wearing signify their purity and holiness, and their golden crowns indicate their royal status. These clearly are beings of significant rank, but their rank serves solely to emphasize the ultimate glory of the one they encircle. The message of the imagery is: *If beings this great encircle the throne, then how great is the one who sits on that throne?*

(3) There are 24 of these beings probably because in their function as leaders of heavenly worship and in their presentation of the prayers of the saints to God (5:8, 8:3-4) they are a heavenly counterpart to the twenty-four priestly and Levitical orders specified in the Old Testament (1 Chron. 24:4; 25:9-31).

d. Next we are told that lightning and thunder are emanating from God's throne.

(1) If you have never been frightened or awed by the power and grandeur of a thunderstorm, you have never been close to one. Nobody in his right mind treats a thunderstorm casually; it is treated with fear and respect. And here that awesome force serves merely as a witness to the power and majesty of the One who sits on the throne.

(2) If you want to see what this symbolism conveys, Ex. 19:16 is a good place to look. When God made his presence known in the lightning and thunder at Sinai, all the people in the camp trembled. He is not a being into whose presence one casually "bops." There is no "Yo, what up?" This is the Almighty!

e. The scene then shifts to before the throne where there are seven blazing torches and something like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

(1) We are told that the seven torches represent the "seven spirits of God," which I have suggested is a figurative reference to the Holy Spirit by way

of Zechariah 4 or possibly Isaiah 11. This third member of the Godhead is ever ready to fulfill the Father's purpose in creation.

(2) The vast quantity of what looks like clear glass further emphasizes the splendor and majesty of God, not only because it was free of impurities but also because clear glass was rare in the ancient world and thus quite expensive (see Job 28:17). Glass at that time normally was dark or even opaque. This material before God's throne that looks like clear glass is so abundant that John says it is "like a sea." Interestingly, the Koran, which of course was written centuries later, contains a legend about a pavement of clear glass that was before King Solomon's throne (see Morris, 88).

3. Ceaseless worship (4:6b-11)

a. Here we see another circle around the throne, this one consisting of four living creatures.

(1) The language seems to indicate that they are right next to the throne, surrounding it on all sides. So they are inside the circle of 24 thrones and probably just outside the halo-shaped rainbow. This concentric arrangement carries an important message; it symbolizes the fact God is the center of all things. It says, as we might put it, that it is not about us and it is not about any heavenly beings – it is about *God*. Everything is about God. Grant Osborne goes so far as to say in his well regarded commentary (p. 228), "These concentric circles around the throne are the core of the vision and depict glory and worship."

(2) The closeness of these four living creatures to the throne suggests that they are a highly exalted order of heavenly beings. They have some similarities with the cherubim of Ezekiel chapters 1 and 10 and with the seraphim of Isaiah chapter 6, but there also are some differences.

(a) They are full of eyes front and back, which signifies awareness and unceasing vigilance. Nothing can be withheld from these beings as they oversee God's affairs.

(b) One of them looks like a lion, one looks like an ox, one has the face of a human, and one looks like a flying eagle. There is much debate about the significance of these creatures' appearance, but I think they are shown this way to communicate their greatness. There is combined in them the great courage, strength, wisdom, and swiftness that the lion, ox, human, and eagle symbolize; they possess the grandest attributes of earthly creatures. And as in the case of the 24 elders, their greatness serves only to magnify the glory of the one on the throne, the one they worship.

(c) Like the seraphim in Isaiah 6, they each have six wings, except that the wings of these creatures are, like the rest of their bodies, covered with eyes. Perhaps these wings represent speed in carrying out the will of God, but do not let uncertainty about any of the details detract from the awesomeness of the overall scene.

(3) As great as these four creatures are, v. 8 says that "day and night they never cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'"

(a) They continually praise God, extolling his holiness (repeated three times as in Isa. 6:3), his power (the Almighty), and his eternity (was, is, and is to come). See, 7:11 and 19:4.

(b) Of course, God's holiness refers not just to his moral purity but to his intrinsic distinctiveness from all other things. It encapsulates all that is "other" about God, and for that reason has been called "an attribute of attributes." It is in that sense that Rev. 15:4 declares that the Lord *alone* is holy. To say God is holy in that sense is, in essence, to say that he is God.

b. And as often as these living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the eternal God, the twenty-four elders fall before his throne – prostrate themselves – throw down their crowns before him, and join in the adoration (see, 7:11 and 19:4). This is absolute and utter submission and homage. God alone is sovereign and worthy of universal honor. Casting down their crowns is an acknowledgment that their authority is delegated. These outbursts do not contradict the continuous worship of v.8 because this is poetry of adoration.

c. As they lie on their faces before the Almighty, the elders praise him proclaiming that he is worthy to receive glory and honor and power because he created all things.

(1) You see, worship, praise, reverence, and awe flow rightly and naturally from a proper vision of God. He is the greatest conceivable being and unlike any human being is *worthy* of our worship and adoration, so claims that God is vain or egotistical in insisting on worship are groundless. Given his glory, splendor, and majesty, it would be wrong for him not to insist on being worshiped.

(2) Moreover, God insists that we worship him not only because it is right and proper to do so, as is a child's respect for a parent, but also because he wants us to stay attached to him for our own good. He is the ultimate reality, and if we lose sight of that truth and begin to construct a fantasy world that denies it, we will suffer harm. Worship, as we might say, helps to keep our mind right, which results in our blessing.

V. Scroll and the Lamb (5:1-14)

A. The sealed scroll (5:1-5)

1. Chapter 4 ends with the four living creatures giving glory and honor and thanks to the eternal God and with the 24 elders prostrating themselves before the Almighty

and praising him as the Creator of all things. Then, at the beginning of chapter 5, John sees a scroll in the right hand of the one seated on the throne.

a. The right hand was traditionally the hand of power or authority. That the scroll is in God's hand says that he is its author. It contains his plan and purpose.

b. As you may know, scrolls of that day were made from a number of papyrus sheets that had been sewn or glued together side by side. (Sheets of animal skin were used but the normal material was papyrus.) A whole papyrus scroll was 32 or 34 feet long. After the sheets were fastened together, you attached a stick on the ends and rolled it up.

(1) The sheets themselves were made by strips of papyrus that were laid side-by-side. They were stuck together by placing another group of strips on top of the first group but running perpendicular to them. They then were wet, mashed together, and left to dry.

(2) Though one could write on both sides of the papyrus sheets, that usually was not done because it was hard to write on the side on which the papyrus strips ran vertically. Your pen would bump along over the strips as you wrote horizontally. So the norm was to write only on the inside of the scroll, the side on which the strips ran horizontally.

2. The scroll that John sees is filled with writing on both sides and is sealed with seven seals.

a. The fact it has writing on both sides says something about the fullness of the revelation. There are different views about the subject or contents of the scroll, but I am with those who think it is God's revelation of the final outcome of his creation, the consummation of his redemptive plan. I think Robert Mounce is on target when he states in his commentary, "[the scroll] contains the full account of what God in his sovereign will has determined as the destiny of the world." Alan Johnson likewise describes its contents (p. 646) as "the unfolding of the consummation of the mystery of all things, the goal or end of all history." That destiny unfolds pictorially and symbolically in the Book of Revelation after the breaking of the seventh and final seal which permits the scroll to be opened.

b. Seals were wax or clay blobs that were attached to certain important documents and impressed with a signet ring from the author of the document. A seal assured that the writing had not been altered and thus that it truly expressed the will of its author. Only the owner or a properly authorized person could break a document seal.

c. The number seven symbolizes perfection, so the fact this scroll has seven seals says that it is perfectly sealed. In other words, its contents are absolutely authentic and it is absolutely secure from unauthorized disclosure.

3. Next appears a mighty angel who booms out a challenge to all creation: "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And we are told in v. 3 that "no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it." Not the mightiest of angels, not the greatest of living or dead saints was able to open the scroll. No creature anywhere was worthy for that task.

4. This failure to find anyone who was worthy to open the scroll causes John to weep loudly in grief.

a. That tells you something about the significance of this scroll. Indeed, it is so significant that when the seventh seal is opened, Rev. 8:1 says "there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." You talk about dramatic.

b. John is weeping not simply because he will not learn what is in the scroll, not simply because his curiosity is being stifled, but because it is clear from the set up in the vision that the fulfillment of God's purposes recorded in the scroll requires someone who is *worthy* to open the scroll. That is because worthiness to open the scroll, as indicated in v. 5, belongs only to the one who conquers the opposition to fulfillment of God's plan, only to the one who is the means of achieving God's plan. If there is no one to open the scroll then there is no faithful champion who has won the victory, who has accomplished God's purposes, and thus what otherwise would have been will not take place. John is mourning that loss.

5. As John is weeping, one of the 24 elders described in chapter 4 says to him, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

a. These titles, the Lion of the tribe of Judah and the root of David, were stock Jewish references to the Messiah that had developed over time from Gen. 49:9-10 and Isa. 11:1, 10. The Messiah was the long-awaited righteous king in the line of David that God had promised would rule supremely. And, of course, Jesus is the Messiah, God's ultimate anointed one. Indeed, the title "Christ" is from a Greek word (*christos*) meaning "anointed one," and "Messiah" is from a Hebrew word (*māshîaḥ*) meaning "anointed one." So they are equivalent terms; to say Jesus is the Christ is to say he is the Messiah. You will recall that Jesus flat out tells the woman at the well in John 4 that he is the Messiah.

b. There was a view among many Jews that the Messiah would overthrow Israel's enemies by military might, as the great King David had done. And here the elder tells John to behold this messianic figure who *has conquered* and who for that reason is able to open the scroll and its seals.

B. The Lamb, the scroll, and heavenly worship (5:6-14)

1. But when John looks, the lion, the mighty conquering Messiah, is portrayed as a standing lamb that appears to have been slain. This lamb's body bears the marks of its execution, and yet it stands at God's throne triumphant. The lion of the tribe of

Judah, Jesus Christ, *is* the lamb. He has conquered, not through military power, but by enduring the hostility of sinners and dying a sacrificial death like a Passover lamb. His crucifixion is the sacrifice that spares all who will receive it from condemnation and takes them from the bondage of the devil to the glory of the kingdom of God.

a. The truth that is pictured here is perhaps nowhere better stated than in Rom. 3:21-26, a text Martin Luther called "the chief point, and the very center of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible."

b. Paul there writes Rom. 3:21-25a: ²¹But now, the righteousness of God has been displayed apart from the law, though being attested by the law and the prophets, ²²that is, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. For there is not a distinction, ²³for all sinned and come short of the glory of God, ²⁴being pronounced righteous as a gift by his grace through the redemption [accomplished] in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God set forth to be, by means of his blood, a wrath-averting sacrifice [appropriated] through faith.

c. It is the absolute glory and holiness of God Almighty portrayed in chapter 4 that makes necessary this sacrifice pictured in chapter 5. We must appreciate the glory and holiness of God to appreciate the gravity and horror of sin. And we must appreciate the gravity and horror of sin to appreciate that an absolutely glorious and holy God cannot simply wink at it. To forgive sin without payment of a penalty would be to condone the evil, to trivialize it, and to open God to the charge of being unjust. It would be to exercise mercy *at the expense of* justice.

d. So regarding our sin, there is tension between aspects of God's nature, between his justice and his mercy, between his holiness and his love.

(1) But that tension is not irreconcilable. The cross is where God's justice and mercy, his holiness and his love are manifested *simultaneously*. Because in his love he desires to forgive us of our sin, he sent Jesus, his Son, to take upon himself the punishment for that sin. He did not wink at it; he did not condone it; he did not trivialize it. Far from it – he bore it!

(2) So in the cross God is able to satisfy both his holiness and his love; in other words, through the cross he is able to forgive consistently with his being, he is able to forgive *justly* or to forgive *righteously*.

2. But this slaughtered lamb also has seven horns and seven eyes.

a. A horn is a symbol of power and strength, and in a number of Jewish writings a horned lamb or ram was a messianic conqueror who leads the people of God to victory.

(1) That he has seven horns indicates he is perfect in might, omnipotent. So there is combined in this image of Jesus both the sacrificial lamb of Calvary

and the warrior Messiah who will finalize the victory he already won at the cross when he destroys all enemies at his Second Coming.

(2) The warrior Messiah is the rider on the white horse in Revelation 19, the one called Faithful and True and the Word of God. We are told there that he in righteousness judges and makes war and that his robe is dipped in blood. He comes with the armies of heaven which are dressed in white linen and follow him on white horses. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

b. The seven eyes symbolize not only the all-seeing nature of the Lamb – as in Zech. 4:10 where "the seven eyes of the Lord . . . range throughout the earth" – but also represent the seven spirits of God, which should be understood as a reference to the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is sent out into all the world to carry out the divine mission.

3. Jesus, the all-powerful and all-knowing slaughtered lamb of God, takes the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne. And when he does, the four living creatures and the 24 elders, who in chapter 4 repeatedly worshiped the one on the throne, break out in worship of the Lamb.

a. The harps and bowls of incense the 24 elders are holding are symbols drawn from the Old Testament of the prayers of the saints that are both spoken and sung. On earth Christians were being despised in the persecution of Emperor Domitian, but in heaven their prayers were precious and pleasing to God

b. In vv. 9-10 the four living creatures and the elders, on their faces before the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ, sing a song of praise to him for his work of redemption. They sing: "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

c. Only Jesus was worthy to reveal the contents of the scroll, God's destiny for the world, because only he accomplished God's eternal purpose by his sacrificial death. He conquered Satan once for all, having achieved the victory over evil at the cross, and when he returns that victory will be manifested in the final judgment of those who already have been conquered and in the eternal reward of those who have already been saved. There is no other savior, no other path, no other way.

(1) In Christ's death he paid the penalty of sin and purchased for God people from all over the world. As the children's song goes, "Red, yellow, black, and white, they are precious in his sight." The gospel is for all people of all nations.

(2) Those drawn out from the nations of the world through faith in Christ collectively have become a kingdom, those submitted to the reign of the Lord,

and individually have become priests, those serving God in worship and in witness to the world. As Israel was to be a "kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6), the new Israel, the church of Christ, is the fulfillment of that intention.

(3) When the Lord Jesus returns, Christians, the redeemed, shall reign with him forever on a new earth, a radically transformed or "heavenized" earth, which is depicted so beautifully in Rev. 21:1-5. We will be kings serving Christ in authority over his creation. It is a hope like none other.

4. Next John looks and hears around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of innumerable angels, myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, praising Jesus in a loud voice. They are saying, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

5. And then John hears every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" And when they said this, the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.

6. Let that sink in for a moment. The Bible is completely monotheistic. There is only one God who is separate from all created things, and only that one God may be worshiped. The worship of anything other than God is idolatry. Even angels refuse worship, as you can see in Rev. 19:10 and 22:8-9. And yet, here the Lamb, Jesus Christ, is worshiped in 5:8-12, which leads to the worship of God and the Lamb by the whole creation (5:13). Rev. 22:3 speaks of the throne (singular) of God and of the Lamb.

a. It is clear from this that Jesus is one with the Father (Jn. 10:30), that they are one in essence or being, so that to worship God the Father and God the Son is to worship only one God. This is part of the mystery of the Trinity, the fact God is a three-person being. There is one essence or being but three distinctive persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit.

b. In eternity the Father, Son, and Spirit freely chose the roles they would take in the redemption of humanity. As James White puts it:

The Father chose to be the fount and source of the entirety of the work; the Son chose to be the Redeemer and to enter into human flesh as one subject to the Father; and the Spirit chose to be the Sanctifier of the church, the indwelling Testifier of Jesus Christ.

c. If someone knocks on your door and tells you that Jesus is a created being, an angel of some kind, do not you believe it. They are urging a heresy on you.

VI. First Six Seals (6:1-17)

A. Comment on Mat. 24:1-42

1. In chapter 6 we have the opening of the first six seals. My understanding of what the opening of these seals represents is influenced by my understanding of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24. I taught two classes on that chapter not long ago, and I am not going to take the time here to cover that ground again. For a fuller explanation of my reasoning, you can check the article, "A Sketch of Mat. 24:1-42," that is on my website, theoutlet.us.

2. Very briefly, I think Jesus says in Mat. 24:1-42 that the time between his ascension to heaven and his return from heaven, the time until the Second Coming, will be a time of unknown length – in the sense it is a length known only by the Father – and will be a time of "birth pains," a time that is punctuated with episodes of pain and distress in various forms. More specifically, it will be a time of unknown duration that is punctuated with false christs, war, famine, earthquakes, persecution, hatred, betrayal, apostasy, and false prophets.

3. He is warning the disciples not to be led astray during the time before the end comes, not to jump to the conclusion that the occurrence of any of these things means the end is immediate. These things all will happen *without the arrival of the end*, just as contractions happen during labor without it being time for the baby to come. Birth pains are clear indications the baby is on the way, but just how many birth pains will be experienced before the actual delivery is unknown.

4. As is true of human birth pains, the birth pains of the Messiah, the episodes of tumult and hardship that will happen during this time of unknown duration prior to the Lord's return, can occur unevenly. Some pains are sharper than others, and some sharp pains can occur early in the process. He tells them, in so many words, that they need to see the fall of Jerusalem, which he alluded to in v. 2, in that light. When they see Jerusalem coming under attack, the abomination that causes desolation (Lk. 21:20), they are not to think this is the time of their redemption. Rather than straightening up and raising their heads as they are to do at the time of their redemption at the Second Coming (Lk. 21:27-28), in this instance they must *flee* immediately – not even take the time to retrieve personal items – because "the abomination that causes desolation" signals not the end, as their questions in v. 3 indicate they believed, but a very severe episode of distress within this age of distress, a particularly sharp pain within "the birth pains of the Messiah."

5. As is true of human birth pains, the birth pains of the Messiah, the episodes of tumult and hardship that will happen during this time of unknown duration prior to the Lord's return, will intensify. They will culminate in the Lord's open and obvious return with the angelic host, which will be a time of mourning for the rebellious from all the people groups on earth because it will be a time of punishment and judgment.

B. Opening of the six seals

1. The opening of the seals is a dramatic buildup to revealing the contents of the scroll. With a number of commentators (e.g., Mounce [p. 151], Boxall [p. 104], Smalley [p. 146]), I do not believe the scroll is opened until the final seal, the seventh seal, is broken.

I agree with Thomas Schreiner (*New Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 830) and others that the events associated with the opening of the first five seals "characterize human history from the time of Christ's cross and resurrection until the time of the end." As Schreiner notes, "During this period of time there are wars, famines, death, and the persecution and martyrdom of the people of God."

2. The events symbolized in conjunction with the opening of the seals correspond to the birth pains to which Jesus referred in the Olivet Discourse (see Johnson, 651), birth pains that ultimately give way to the judgment at Christ's return. That the first four depictions are called forth by the four living creatures symbolizes God's control over even the forces of rebellion, chaos, and hostility. As with Satan's attacks in the Book of Job, they occur only within the scope of God's permission. When the sixth seal is opened, the judgment is imminent, history has moved to that "great day of wrath," what I take to be the dominant subject of the scroll.

3. First four seals: Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (6:1-8)

a. The opening of the first four seals of the scroll brings forth what is known as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Ian Boxall remarks (p. 103): "Few scenes in John's book have been as influential in art, literature, and wider culture as this. Perhaps its most famous representation is Albrecht Dürer's woodcut in which the four ride out together, trampling bishops, princes and merchants in their wake, an indication that power and prestige cannot render human beings immune from what John sees."

b. Rider on white horse – conquest and militarism

(1) The Lamb of chapter 5, the Lord Jesus, is the one who opens the seals because he is the only one worthy to open them. When he opens the first seal, one of the four living creatures thunders "Come!" and then John sees a white horse with a rider who has a bow and a victor's crown (not a royal crown) that was given to him, meaning he was permitted by God to have his victories. This rider came out conquering, and to conquer, which indicates his lust for conquest. He was intent on conquering more than he had already conquered.

(2) Though some have argued that this rider on the white horse is the Lord Jesus, since Jesus is described in 19:11-16 as coming on a white horse to destroy his enemies, but as Beasley-Murray notes (p. 131), "this is to play havoc with the whole scheme of John's vision." The only similarity between this rider on the white horse and Jesus in 19:11-16 is the color of the horse! Everything in this chapter indicates that the rider represents some form of distress or hardship, and not only is Christ already represented in the vision as the one opening the seals, but he certainly would not appear as merely one of the Four Horsemen.

(3) Leon Morris states (p. 101) that white was the color of victory, and R. H. Charles cites in his commentary (1:162) a number of triumphant warriors who rode white horses. The bow in the O.T. was a symbol of military power (e.g., Hos. 1:5;

Jer. 51:56), and at this time may have been particularly associated with the Parthians, a warlike federation of tribes east of the Euphrates River that had defeated an invading Roman army in A.D. 62. "They were known as mounted warriors, and their cavalry were especially known for their formidable archery" (Keener, 202).

(4) With the majority of commentators (Smalley, 150), this rider is a symbol of conquest and militarism. As Jesus said in Matthew 24, this present age, the age of birth pains, will see "nation rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom." That has been the case.

c. Rider on red horse – bloodshed

(1) With the opening of the second seal, John sees a rider on a red horse. Red was the color of slaughter and bloodshed. This rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

(2) This is broader than wars between nations or kingdoms. It includes the bloodshed of civil strife, which occurs *within* nations and kingdoms, as well as religious persecution, terrorism, and all forms of murder. In Matthew 24 Jesus makes clear that human bloodshed will be a part of this age.

c. Rider on black horse – famine

(1) With the opening of the third seal, John sees a rider on a black horse. Black symbolizes scarcity. The scales in the rider's hand and the prices stated for wheat and barley indicate he brings famine. In a famine, prices rise (these are 10 -12 times higher than normal) and food is very carefully allocated (so no one gets an unfair share – see, Ezek. 4:16; Lev. 26:26).

(2) "Do not damage the oil and the wine" may be a way of indicating the concern over such basics caused by scarcity. Or it may be a reference to the fact Roman owners of provincial estates in this area at this time grew more olives and grapes than grain because doing so was more profitable than growing grain. In fact, after a famine in A.D. 92 Domitian had tried to restrict grape growing in Asia to force the growing of more grain. If that is what the saying reflects, it may be a way of emphasizing the famine's impact by highlighting the poor preparation for that eventuality.

(3) Mat. 24:7 speaks of famines in this age of birth pains. They have occurred regularly throughout the world.

d. Rider on pale, yellowish-green horse – death

(1) With the opening of the fourth seal, John sees a rider on a pale, yellowish-green horse. The horse is the color of a corpse. The rider is specifically named Death, and he is being followed by Hades, the realm of the dead.

(2) Death by sword, famine, disease, and animals is part of the distress of the age in which we live. It will continue until the Lord returns and finalizes the healing of this fallen creation. The fact death is an inherent aspect of the disasters symbolized in the first three seals shows that the seals need not be read as strictly sequential occurrences but can be read as occurring simultaneously (see Beale, 370).

4. The fifth seal (6:9-11)

a. With the opening of the fifth seal, John sees under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. Christian martyrdom will be a part of this age. As D. A. Carson points out in his commentary on Matthew (p. 503), the 20th century had more Christian martyrs than all previous nineteen centuries put together. It seems removed from us because it doesn't happen in America (yet!).

b. That the souls of the martyrs are seen as being under the altar in God's heavenly temple is a way of saying that their untimely deaths on earth are, from God's perspective, a sacrifice on the altar of heaven (see, 2 Tim. 4:6). In O.T. sacrifice, the blood (life) of the bull was poured out at the base of the altar of burnt offering (Lev. 4:7; Ex. 29:12).

c. These martyred saints appeal to God for vindication, for justice. They want the world's judgment of them to be reversed. They want God to be glorified by punishing those who defied him by attacking his people.

d. The white robes they were given represent blessedness (see, 7:13-14) or perhaps victory as in 6:2. They are in a blessed state as they await the outworking of God's plan. They are told to rest a little longer until the full number of martyrs has been reached. At that time, God will vindicate them and glorify himself through the final judgment. This is part of what leads me to see the events associated with the opening of the five seals as things that precede the final judgment. That will not take place until more Christians have died for their faith.

5. The sixth seal (6:12-17)

a. With the opening of the sixth seal, John sees a heavenly upheaval that is very similar to the description in Mat. 24:29, which description there is recognized by a large majority of scholars to refer to the *parousia*, the Second Coming of Christ.

(1) The language of Mat. 24:29 is drawn from Isa. 13:10 and 34:4. Most basically it depicts what we might call "earth-shattering" events, those interventions by God that seem to "turn the world upside down." In Isa. 13:10 it refers to God's judgment against Babylon; in Isa. 34:4 it refers to God's judgment against "all the nations" but particularly Edom.

(2) Similar language is used elsewhere of God's judgment within history on cities and nations (e.g., Ezek. 32:7; Joel 2:10; Amos 8:9), but as Donald Hagner states in "*hēlios*" in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 3:731, "[t]here is, however, a tendency for this language to shade into a description of the eschatological Day of the Lord. This tendency becomes more apparent in the utilization of the same language in the Pseudepigrapha (e.g., Ass. Mos. 10:5; Sib. 3:801 f.) and in the NT." In other words, this language became an image for the ultimate divine intervention, that which occurs at the end of the age and most radically alters this reality (age) by bringing it to a close and ushering in the final, eternal state, the consummated kingdom of God.

b. The birth pains are here at their end. The heavenly upheaval symbolizes that Christ is returning and the final judgment is about to begin. So frightening is that prospect that God's opponents, from the greatest and most powerful to the lowliest, hide themselves in the caves and among the rocks and call out to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" They would rather be buried in an avalanche than face what they know is coming.

c. In my understanding, the scroll that is about to be opened with the breaking of the seventh and final seal elaborates on the terror of this judgment and warns the church of the tribulation, the period of intensified birth pains – intensified persecution – that will immediately precede that judgment. This revelation of this *final* and *ultimate* conflict carries a message for the church regarding all the manifestations of this spiritual conflict throughout history. God's victory is sure, and eternal glory is the reward of faithfulness.

(1) As we will see, this "great day of judgment" is a judgment event that includes vengeance and punishment of God's enemies on the earth and finishes with an eternal judgment of all humanity. As Paul indicated in 2 Thess. 1:7-8 and Jude indicated in Jude 14-15, Christ will return with mighty angels and will take vengeance, inflict punishment, on the unbelievers of the world.

(2) So this return in judgment will be a cosmic nightmare for the enemies of God who are then dwelling on the earth, and it will continue into the general resurrection and the final assignment of resurrected (or transformed) humanity to their permanent dwelling places, which will be either the new heavens and new earth or hell, depending on one's relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

(3) Before that time, the church will face extreme persecution from a Satan-inspired political ruler – a magnified form of what John's immediate audience was experiencing – but God's victory is certain, and all who remain faithful in whatever their circumstance will share in the joy and glory of it.

d. As readers, we are now primed for the opening of the final seal and the revelation of the contents of the scroll, but we must wait. Chapter 6 ends with the

question of who will be able to stand when the terrifying judgment of God falls. How can anyone stand under such a holy wrath?

VII. Christians assured (144,000 and multitudes) (7:1-17)

A. Chapter 7 forms a suspenseful interlude before the opening of the seventh seal, but it serves more than a literary purpose. It provides assurance to Christians, the people of God, that God knows they are his and will spare them from his punishment in the day of his wrath. *They* will stand because they are marked as objects of God's saving mercy. They will all be brought safely into eternal life with God. This assurance is needed in light of the terrible judgment to be revealed.

B. Sealing of God's servants (7:1-8)

1. Four angels, who are God's agents of judgment, are pictured as controlling the winds that have the power to damage the earth and the sea. ("Four corners of the earth" is an idiom based on the four compass directions and means every part of the world.) They are holding these winds back until the time God has decreed for judgment. The sirocco, a scorching wind off the desert, was used in the O.T. as a metaphor for divine punishment (e.g., Jer. 4:11; Hos. 13:15) and wind became a metaphor in Jewish apocalyptic writing for judgment (e.g., 1 Enoch 76).

2. They are instructed by another angel, who comes from the east (from the rising of the sun), not to damage the earth, the sea, or the trees until the "servants of God" have been marked with a seal on their foreheads.

a. This seal is to assure the Christians that in the coming judgment God in his grace has marked them for protection. He will not lose sight of any who are his. Though more Christians will suffer at the hands of God's enemies, they will be protected from the wrath that really matters, the wrath of Almighty God. They are sealed to salvation.

b. In Ezekiel 9 God instructed a man clothed in linen, probably an angel, to place a mark on the forehead of all those who were deeply troubled over the sins of Jerusalem. His six companions were told to put to death all those who did not have the mark. The vision given to John is obviously alluding to this text.

c. It appears from 14:1 that the mark this seal leaves on the forehead is the name of the Lamb and the name of his Father. It is a mark of those who belong to God.

3. In vv. 4-8 John hears that the number of the sealed is 144,000 from every tribe of the sons of Israel with 12,000 coming from each of the 12 listed tribes.

a. Those sealed are identified in v. 3 as "the servants (or slaves) of our God," which in the context of the book means they are Christians (e.g., 11:18, 19:10, 22:3, 22:6, 22:9). There is wide agreement that the figure 144,000 is a symbolic number, as

is common in apocalyptic literature. It is the number of the tribes of Israel (12) squared and multiplied by a thousand, which is a three-fold way of emphasizing completeness. The point is that the full number of this group has been included; not a single one has been overlooked.

b. Some think the 144,000 represent *Jewish* Christians, but I am with the many commentators who believe this is a symbolic reference to the entire church represented in terms of its Jewish root. There is physical Israel (physical descendants of Abraham), true Israel (physical Jews who accept God's testimony about Jesus), and new Israel (the church, being comprised of true Israel and the Gentiles who have been grafted into it). The church's identity as the new Israel, the new people of God, is indicated in several ways.

(1) The church is addressed as the twelve tribes in Jas. 1:1.

(2) The Christian is the true Jew in Rom. 2:29, Abraham is the father of all Christians in Rom. 4:11, and Christians are Abraham's seed in Gal. 3:29.

(3) The church is described as the "Israel of God" in Gal. 6:16.

(4) Descriptions of Israel are taken directly from the O.T. and applied to the church in 1 Pet. 2:9.

(5) John himself has already indicated that unbelieving Jews are actually a "synagogue of Satan" (2:9, 3:9), and he regards the New Jerusalem as the home of Christians (21:2ff).

c. Limiting those who are sealed to Jewish Christians makes a distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians that seems contrary to the oneness of the church expressed in Gal. 3:26-29 and Col. 3:11. And given that the purpose of the sealing is to mark the recipients for protection from God's judgment, it makes no sense to limit that protection to Jewish Christians. As Osborne states (p. 312):

The purpose here is to stress the perfect completeness of the whole (note "every tribe") "number" of the persevering faithful in the church in a threefold way: taking 12 (the number of completeness), then squaring it, and then multiplying by 1000, another symbol of completeness in the book (note also the "24 elders" of 4:4, the "12,000 stadia" of 21:16, the "144 cubits" of 21:17, and the "twelve crops of fruit" of 22:2).

d. The list of the twelve tribes is somewhat odd. Judah is put first no doubt because the Messiah is from that tribe (Mat. 1:3, 2:6; Heb. 7:14). Instead of Manasseh and Ephraim being listed in place of their father Joseph, Joseph is listed along with Manasseh, but it is quite possible that Joseph here stands for the tribe of Ephraim as in Num. 1:32-33. Levi is included, which often is not done because that tribe did not receive an

allotment of land, and Dan is excluded, perhaps because that tribe fell into idolatry (see Judges 18).

e. The point of the symbolism is that the saints have nothing to fear from the coming wrath of God, the approach of which is symbolized in 6:12-17. When that terrible judgment falls on the inhabitants of the earth, every faithful servant at that time, and by implication at any time, will be protected. The message for the seven churches and for us is to remain faithful to Christ in the face of any threat or persecution because the faithful certainly will be spared the infinitely worse wrath of Almighty God.

C. Bliss of the redeemed in heaven (7:9-17)

1. The scene now shifts from his *hearing* about the sealing of all the saints on earth in preparation for the outpouring of God's wrath on this evil world to his *seeing* the multitude from all the people groups of the world that kept the faith during the great tribulation, that time of intense hostility and persecution that precedes the final judgment. They stand before the throne and before the Lamb, a place of honor, sheltered by God's presence, never again to suffer or weep, and being guided by the Lamb to springs of living water.

2. It is an image of blessing as a reward of faithfulness, and these great-tribulation saints stand as an example and a challenge for saints during any time of tribulation. If a saint's time of suffering is indeed the great tribulation, then the vision is immediately applicable to their situation. If a saint's time of suffering is some lesser tribulation, then they should be strengthened and encouraged by the multitude shown in the vision to have stood strong in the face of worse persecution.

3. These saints have white robes, as were given to the faithful martyrs in 6:11, which indicate purity and victory. They also have palm branches "which were a sign of rejoicing on a festive occasion, such as the triumphal entry of Christ (John 12:13)" (Osborne, 320).

4. So God not only indicates by the image of sealing that no Christian will fall under his holy wrath, he also holds out in this picture the glory and joy that faithfulness in persecution will bring. Allegiance to God is the path to the deepest imaginable blessing, no matter how it may look at the moment.

5. I think this is a picture of the great-tribulation faithful who are in heaven prior to the resurrection and the final assignment of humankind to their permanent dwelling places of the new heavens and new earth or hell. Yet the description of their lives assumes their continuing existence in the final eternal state. Their thirst will there be ever quenched by the spring of the water of life (21:6, 22:17), and there will be no more suffering or tears (21:4). Precisely where this picture fits in terms of the timing of the end is not spelled out presumably because that detail is not necessary for the point, which is that those who hold fast to their faith in the face of pressure to compromise will be blessed beyond measure.

6. Although 7:14 specifically states that those robed in white had come out of the great tribulation, I think it is possible that all the faithful of all time are represented by the great multitude in this vision.

a. In other words, it seems possible that the faithful of all generations are pictured and described as those who came out of the great tribulation because the nature of their faith was the same as the faith of those who came out of the great tribulation. The faith of that final, most severely tested generation was a display of the faith of all generations. That may explain the emphasis on the great number.

b. But even if the pictured multitude is only the last generation of saints, their blessedness still implies blessedness for the faithful of all generations. What they receive by enduring in faith all will receive by enduring in faith. The question is whether that truth is conveyed by the picture of the multitude or only by an inference from the blessing of the last generation.

7. The question by the elder in v. 13 about the identity of those clothed in white robes presupposes John's unasked question. John knows the angel does not expect him to answer, as it is the angel who knows the answer. The question simply opens the door for the angel to give the information to John.

8. These saints are crying out "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" and the heavenly beings fall on their faces before the throne and worship God. They say "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

9. These saints are said by the elder to have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. This is, of course, a reference to the cleansing purchased by Christ's sacrificial death. As Metzger suggests (p. 61-62), these saints "washed their robes" through their steadfast faith; they were cleansed by Christ's blood through a genuine faith that shone through their trials. In Paul's phrase, they worked out their own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12).