The Book of Revelation

Zanesville, OH | Wednesday/Sunday Bible Study

**Chapter 6**

* **6:1-8– The First Four Seals: The Four Horsemen**
  + In order to properly understand the nature of the first four seals, one needs to know the OT background from which it is largely derived. The main passages dealt with is Zech. 1:8-15 and 6:1-8. It is clear from those passages that God is punishing the nation(s) who have persecuted His people severely beyond His approval.
  + The second passage is Ezek. 14:12-23 which deals with a series of judgments (4) sent by God to inflict the Israelites because of their blatant and wicked idolatry (Ezek. 14:3-11). The purpose of these judgments are clearly two-fold. It serves as punishment to the unrepentant idolatrous people but as a test to the righteous remnant so as to purify their faith.
  + A passage that may not be as obvious in connection with the passage here in Revelation is Lev. 26:18-28 which pertains to the curses of the covenant. Ezek. 14:12-23 may be a further development of this passage. The point in Leviticus is that those who forsake God’s covenant and His ordinances will be punished thoroughly for their iniquities. These would serve as both punishments and warnings.
* **Verse 1**– The worthy Lamb now breaks the first seal of the book. Note that the book/scroll is not opened until all seven seals are broken. For the first four seals, when the Lamb breaks each one, a living creature will call a horseman by saying, *“Come.”* The idea of the voice of thunder is that it is in conjunction with God’s will (cf. 4:5).
* **Verse 2: The First Seal**– As the first seal is broken, we are introduced the first of four horses and the horsemen. The first is white in color and the purpose of this mighty (bow) rider is to conquer. This first horse and horseman most likely points to God granting authority (crown) to an agent to begin destruction on the earth.
* The color white may refer to Satan’s attempts to mimic God (cf. 2 Cor. 11:13-15; Rev. 13:1-13) and/or a way of describing God’s purpose to redeem His saints through their perseverance in righteousness (cf. 2:3, 10, 19, 25; 3:10-11). Either way, this rider is under the authority of God. The judgment and redemptive purpose begins.
* **Verses 3-4: The Second Seal**– The first horse and its rider indicate a broad sense of destruction and persecution. The following three get more specific and more severe. As The Lamb breaks the second seal, a red horse is seen with its rider who is given a sword and his purpose is to take peace from the earth resulting in slaughter and bloodshed. The red horse and its horseman is connected with the idea of bloodshed.
* Many see this as an argument to support civil unrest and strife from within the Roman government and perhaps the Jews and others as well. This may be a part of the imagery here but it also deals with the slaughter of God’s people (Matt. 10:28-39; Rev. 2:10, 13; 6:9; 12:11; 17:6; 18:24). This particular horse and its rider clearly echoes Ezek. 14:17.
* **Verses 5-6: The Third Seal**– The third seal is broken by The Lamb and a black horse is observed with its rider carrying scales. The carrying of the scales is further clarified in v. 6 with the indication of famine being the judgment. Black denotes mourning, distress and calamity commonly associated with famine especially in the OT (Jer. 14:2; Lam. 5:10; Nah. 2:10).
* The scales were symbolic of famines and drought considering that when food became scarce, it was usually distributed using scales (2 Kings 7:1; Ezek. 4:10-11, 16). A voice (Christ or The Father?) in v. 6 further describes the severity of the famine. The famine is not as bad as it could be since the supply of oil and wine are not harmed.
* However, the prices for the basic necessities (wheat, barley) are 8-16 times more than what they usually were. Given that they would need these first, oil and wine (although untouched) may not have been able to be purchased. This again is a clear allusion to Ezek. 14:13 and Lev. 26:20, 26.
* **Verses 7-8: The Fourth Seal**– The growing severity of each judgment is clearly noted as each seal continues to be broken. The fourth seal climaxes with the obvious resolution of the prior 3 judgments. The fourth seal is broken and a pale, green/gray (ashen) horse is seen with its rider being Death and Hades is said to follow.
* Destruction, civil unrest and famine undoubtedly can lead to death or pertain to death in one way or the other. Thus, it is no surprise that death is portrayed as the fourth horseman. That Hades is said to follow him is also of no surprise since Hades is the realm of the dead (cf. Lk. 16:19-31; Rev. 20:13-14).
* Limits are clearly placed on this rider by The Lamb just as it was with the famine. The time for complete destruction has not yet arrived. The end of v. 8 may be a summary statement of sorts speaking of the ways people are killed in vv. 2-6. Pestilence and wild beasts (associated w/ first three seals) are added to emphasize Ezek. 5:12, 15-17 and 14:15, 19-21 which is the background of this passage.
* In addition Lev. 26:16, 21-25 is used as well to bring to the forefront of the audience’s mind the terror that will befall those who reject the word of the Lord. However, these four seals (four judgments) are carried out with a two-fold purpose in mind: (1) Execute wrath against the enemies of God and saints, (2) Purify the righteous servants of God.
* **Final thoughts on the first four seals**– The seals are most obviously connected to evil, wickedness and satanic forces. However, Jesus and God are clearly in control and they give authority to these forces to carry out their respective actions. This is seen primarily because of the OT background passages which clearly demonstrates that God is behind them. Considering such, why do They allow these events to take place?
* The simplest answer is one already mentioned. These four seals act as both punishments and redemption. They are punishments for God’s enemies and the enemies of His saints but they are the agents through which His saints are refined and purified (cf. 1 Pet. 1:6-7; 4:12-19) resulting in salvation and God’s glorification.
* **6:9-11– The Fifth Seal: Souls under the altar**
* **Verse 9**– The Lamb breaks the fifth seal and there is a human response to the suffering and evil inflicted (perhaps from 6:-2-8). The human response comes from the souls who have been slain for the word of God and their maintained testimony (cf. 2:13; 12:11; 18:24). These saints are described as *“slain souls”* connecting them with their Lord, *“The Slain Lamb”* (cf. Lk. 9:23-24; Rom. 8:35-39; 1 Pet. 4:1-2).
* These souls are described as being under the altar. The altar here may refer to the altar of sacrifice (Lev. 4:18, 30, 34) or the altar of incense (Ex. 30:1-10; Lev. 4:7). The point is that these faithful ones have died a sacrificial death like their Lord because of the wickedness of others. They take refuge in the place where expiation for sin took place and prayers ascended to God (Psa. 5:11-12).
* **Verse 10**– These slain souls have a request which comes before God. Their concern pertains to righteous vindication on those who have wronged God and His precious ones. Their plea is that God punish these evil ones but it is phrased as a question.
* In their now exalted and comforted state, they ask how long it will be until God’s just judgment is executed on the *“earth-dwellers”* (cf. 3:10; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:8). This plea is ultimately parallel to the imprecatory psalms which call for God’s judgment on those who stand in opposition to Him and His people (Psa. 5:4-6, 10; 79:10, 12; 94:3).
* God is called holy and true (cf. 3:7; 15:3-4; 16:7; 19:2) meaning that He is just and He is entirely in opposition to any form of sin and evil. There is no doubt that God will inflict His uttermost wrath on these vile earth-dwellers but the question is when it will happen.
* **Verse 11**– An initial response is granted to the slain souls as they are given white robes. These robes indicate the purity and refined state they exhibit after being tested by fire. They are victorious in death. This also connects them with God’s seal of approval (cf. 3:4-5; 7:9, 13-14) since they have maintained their walk with Him despite their trying circumstances.
* Furthermore, they are told to wait a *little while longer* until more of their brethren are killed (cf. Dan. 12:13). God’s holding off of this vindication is always portrayed in light of His desire that all should repent (2 Pet. 3:9). The day will come when that time ends and God wrath will be poured out against the evil, unrepentant ones.
* **6:12-17– The Sixth Seal: Judgment**
* **Verses 12-14**– The breaking of the sixth seal shows a more complete response to the question asked by the slain souls: *“How long?”* The answer is not in terms of a time period but the point is, it is guaranteed God will bring about punishment and judgment for His enemies and the enemies of the saints.
* The scene in these verses is one of cosmic disruption. All the cosmos are personified and described as changing or moving vehemently so as to amplify the nature of the wrath of God and His powerful judgment. The language here comes from the OT (Isa. 13:10-13; 24:1-6, 19-23; 34:4; Ezek. 32:6-8; Joel 2:10; 30-31; 3:15-16) and is often used to portray God’s judgment against sinful nations/people.
* When language such as this is used, it is not to be taken as a literal, unique and isolated event. As seen above, this imagery has been used time and time again to describe God’s wrath being poured out against evil nations and those who stand in opposition to Him. All these scenes and pictures of judgment ultimately point us to the final judgment (2 Pet. 3:10-12).
* **Verse 15**– The group of people singled out for judgment are those stand in opposition to God by worshipping the beast and practicing idolatry (13:16; 19:18-19; cf. Psa. 2:1-3). Their desire is to hide themselves in caves and among the rocks of the mountains (Isa. 2:10, 19, 21). Their guilt rests heavy on their conscience and their desire is to hide from the One who will hold them accountable (cf. Gen. 3:8).
* **Verses 16-17**– The nature and height of their fear is expounded upon with their desire for the mountains and rocks to fall on them instead of having to face The Father and The Lamb (cf. Isa. 13:7-8; Hos. 10:8). Those who are guilty of rejecting God do not fear death but instead seek for it. The one thing they dread the most is having to face God (2 Thess. 1:7-9).
* The day of God’s wrath is described by these evil ones as something no one can stand against (cf. Joel 2:11, 31; Zeph. 1:14-18). It is entirely too overwhelming because sin has run its full course and God must take care of it. Their indication of such is phrased in the manner of a rhetorical question which will be answered in chapter 7.
* If this is what sin leads to, no one should want any part of it. The unfortunate, sad reality is that even though God’s warnings and admonishment are given in order to avoid this destructive state, people do not heed them (cf. 1:3). Those who have a false sense of security in their sin will one day learn security can only be found in God.