

Revelation 4-7: Worship, Scrolls & Seals

We are ready to look at the book of Revelation again. Last time we finished our sojourn through the seven letters to the seven churches. What is the book of Revelation like? It is a little bit like an action movie with a thrill a minute. Things keep moving along in the book of Revelation. Amazing things happen and you hardly have time to digest one. You get done escaping from one thing and here comes something else. Or it is like a lecture that covers the history of politics from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in 90 minutes. Or it is like one of those sermons you hear that goes from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22 in 45 minutes. You can get lost. There is a lot of good stuff. There are lots of interesting things that happen. But it is possible to lose one's place. In the book of Revelation one thing keeps coming after another and we need to be ready for everything.

What is the book of Revelation about? Chapters 4-11 are one giant block, which I would like to go through with you over the next while. What are the themes? Since so much happens, what should we single out? First, we should single out that there is worship to God the Father and God the Son, because God is worthy of all worship. That is a clear theme from chapters 4 and 5. God is worthy of worship. Second, there is a scroll that has to do with human history. It is going to be opened. That scroll reveals God's mastery over human history. The scroll is unsealed and it sets judgment and troubles loose on the earth. Even those troubles are under the sovereign lordship of Christ. Evildoers and Christians alike will be touched, but Christians will be preserved and not finally harmed even if they die. Overall the picture is that God reigns over all things, including suffering, warfare, strife, and pestilence. He rules over it all. And it is the responsibility of believers to endure. It is the responsibility of unbelievers to repent. It may not be only suffering. There may be some other things going on as well, which we will talk about when the time comes.

Revelation 4 and 5 start us off with angels. Chapters 4 and 5 are centered on the throne of God. We are lifted up to get a vision of heaven and we see, in Revelation 4:1-11, splendid heavenly beings surrounding the throne. Magnificent creatures call out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." They worship God the Father and there is a pattern we are going to see in the worship of the Father and the Son. In their worship it is said, "You are worthy." Then it is said He should receive something because of something He did. In the first one it is, "You are worthy our Lord and God to receive glory and honor and power because You created all things." Because God created all things, these living beings come and prostrate themselves before the throne of God. They give Him their crowns, which I take to mean their power, their glory, their achievements, and their splendor. What they have is grand and great and powerful, and they got it from Him, so they give it back to Him. He created all things and they give all things back to God.

In His right hand, on the throne of God, God Himself has a scroll. He is holding it and it is sealed with seven seals. Chapter five begins with the question, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" In antiquity a scroll that was significant was sealed. So this signifies it is an important document. We have to distinguish between the document itself and the seals. The seals are not the scroll. Whatever you have seen or heard, the scroll and the seals are different things. The opening of the seals is preliminary to the reading of the scroll.

So who is worthy to open the seals? Who is worthy to get to the point that the scroll can be revealed? In Revelation 5:3, it does not seem like anybody can be found in heaven or on the earth. Nobody can open it or look inside it. And John begins to weep because he wants to know what is in that scroll. One of the elders says not to worry because someone will be found who is worthy. In Revelation 5:5 who will it be?

It is going to be the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, because He has triumphed. He will open the seals. Again, the seals are not the content.

Consider that a scroll that was written on both sides and sealed would have been an important document. Not everything that people wrote in antiquity would have this kind of a status, with both sides written on and then sealed. In fact most things in antiquity were written on a piece of paper just like today. Paper was much more expensive, but they did have paper made out of papyrus. Possibly something could be written on a tablet, such as what school children wrote on. Most documents, then as now, were not really important. This was a very important document. It has something precious in it. It could be a deed that would be written and sealed this way. Or it could be a testament to be opened upon somebody's death. It might be some kind of a promissory document. People have wondered what this document is, because the book of Revelation never tells what the scroll is. So theologians, who have to do something to earn their living, are charged with the responsibility of trying to find out what it might be. There are three possible answers. I am telling you very deliberately that there are three answers given by good solid evangelical theologians that you and I should respect. Their views differ, however, and I am mentioning this explicitly to you so that you will understand that although I am confident of a lot of things as I speak on the book of Revelation, I am not confident on everything. Good people can disagree, even if we take fundamentally a similar approach.

So here are three answers to the question. One is that it describes the decrees of God for human history. Michael Wilcock takes this view that it is a full account of what God has determined as the destiny of the world. Or it is the explanation of history. That is what Wilcock says and I think he has good judgment overall. But the problem I have with this view is that it seems to make the seals and the scroll one and the same when they go to explain the view.

Another view is that it is the book of life. This second view that it is the book of life makes a lot of sense to me, because the book of life is already mentioned in Revelation 3:5. Those who persevere will be written in the book of life. Revelation 20:15 also mentions the book of life. It will be opened on the last day. So the book of life is mentioned in two prominent places. Furthermore, it makes sense to have us long to open it. I like this view because it says the seals are a tragedy in human history. We have to go through the tragedy and the trouble and the warfare and the conquests and some good conquests of human history before we can get to the end of the story. Then the book of life is revealed and everyone gets to celebrate their inclusion in the Lamb's book of life and their inclusion in eternity. Of course the Lamb who opens it would have the greatest right to open that book because after all He is the one who created the possibility of that book being written. We ourselves would want to see it opened. We can see why John would weep about that. And I think it is very plausible that this is the book of life.

There is another possibility that is also extremely plausible, which is that the scroll is the final gift of the kingdom of God. Options two and three actually overlap. If it is the final gift of the kingdom of God then it is God's final will or testament for mankind proceeding from His throne at the end of history. The reason why I like this view is that it fits the historical context. Scrolls written on two sides and sealed with various seals were often testaments or deeds or wills. The other reason is, if you trace out the seven seals, the seventh seal unleashes another string of seven. When the seventh seal is opened, it starts a cycle of seven trumpets and the seventh trumpet sounds all the way to the end of chapter 11. When the seventh trumpet sounds in Revelation 11:15 there were loud voices in heaven, which said the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ and He will reign forever and ever. And they praised God and they thanked God that at last His judgment has come. The evil nations have been overthrown and God's reign has begun. So I like that view because it connects to the end. The truth is that I am deeply enamored of two different views and I am pretty sure one of them is right, but I

change my mind sometimes. I tend to think number three is right, by just following the logic of the divisions.

The conclusion is that we do have a scroll. It is either God's rule to be unleashed or revealed or fulfilled at the end of history or it is the book of life. They are two good options. But again, the question is, who is worthy to open this scroll? Apparently no one is, until we read in chapter 5 that there is someone. It is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David. He has triumphed, according to Revelation 5:5. He will open the scroll and its seven seals.

Then Revelation 5:6 says, "Then I saw a lamb." You might expect John to say "a lion," but He says "a lamb." Jesus is both the Lion and the Lamb. He roars and yet He is also the Lamb who was led to the slaughter. And we hear that Jesus is also worshiped. He is worshiped in a very similar set of terms to the way the Father is worshiped. "You are worthy to open the scroll," according to Revelation 5:9, "And you are worthy to receive power, honor, glory and praise." Jesus is worthy not because He is the creator, but because He was "slain and purchased men to be a kingdom and priests." That is why He is worthy. That is how we can say that it fits that He is both the Lion and the Lamb. He is the Lion who roars and rules, the regal Lion. And yet we must always join Jesus in His power with Jesus in His humility. He is the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world to redeem His people. Incidentally, I do think that Lion and Lamb are both able to fit either the 'book of life view' or the 'rule over history view.'

So He takes the scrolls and He begins to open them up. In chapter 6, when the Lamb opens it, living creatures say in a loud thundering voice, "Come," and a series of riders come out. Do you know where in the Old Testament there a series of four horses or riders in visions? You know by now that to make sense of the book of Revelation you have to know the Old Testament. It is in Zechariah chapter 6. I am not going to read the whole thing to you, but Zechariah is often used in Revelation. Zechariah 6:1-4 says,

I looked up again—and there before me were four chariots coming out from between two mountains—mountains of bronze! The first chariot had red horses, the second black, the third white, and the fourth dappled—all of them powerful. I asked the angel who was speaking to me, 'What are these, my lord?' The angel answered me, 'These are the four spirits of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole world.'

The vision goes on from there. So I take the imagery from Revelation 6 to be coming from Zechariah 6.

I am going to tell you plainly that the first rider is deeply mysterious, so I am just going to skip to the second one. I am going to come back to the first one in a few minutes, but I would like to start with what I know and then move to what I do not know. I know that the horses are largely symbolic of strife and conflict and battle. That is what horses did in antiquity. You did not use a horse to get from here to there. How did you get from here to there? Either you walked, or if you were a little better off, you road a donkey. Horses were more expensive, because they break down more often. They have to be taken to the repair shop more often, and they eat more, and they are harder to work with. If you have a horse it is because you want it for battle. So the very idea of a horse already suggests battle.

When you look at what happens you see why the horses would signify battle. Revelation 6:3-4 speaks of the red horse, which is the second horse: "When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, 'Come!' Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword." The red

horse unquestionably represents warfare and bloodshed unleashed upon the earth. There is sorrow, violence, no peace, war and the sword, which are marks of human history leading up to the day when God's reign begins and the book of life is opened. Even when there appears to be peace there are other kinds of war. When there is no military battle, there is Cold War, there is economic war, there is social war, there is class war, there is race war, and there is gender war. There are all kinds of wars going on. If we had full political awareness, we would know that right now on any given day there are dozens of simmering conflicts across the globe. Most of them do not get into the news. There is conflict in the mountains of Yemen and in Northern Ireland and among separatist groups off in the mountains of Eastern Europe, as well as in various places in Africa and South America. There is always war.

The black horse also describes the way things are in this age. The black horse comes out in Revelation 6:5-6. The marks of the black horse are that its rider is holding a pair of scales in his hand and he is calling out saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, three quarts of barley for a day's wages, but do not damage the oil and the wine." Initially this seems very obscure, but all you have to do is think a little bit. How are you doing if you have to work an entire day to earn one quart of wheat? You are doing poorly. We have barley soup and barley bread, but do you know what barley was ordinarily used for in antiquity? It was used as grain for animals. So if a day's wage only buys you three quarts of barley, you are doing poorly.

Then he goes on to say, "Do not damage the oil or the wine." What would oil and wine be? We pray that God will give us this day our daily bread. Wheat is our daily subsistence. What are oil and wine? They are surplus and luxury. Oil was not necessarily the sign of superabundance or that you were wealthy, but it was a good thing in life and indicated pleasant life and abundance. It might have been modest abundance, but still abundance. The idea, therefore, is that the average person is going to suffer hardship while the extraordinary always have abundance. That is the way it is in the world. Most of human history, including the present time, is marked by the problem of scarcity, of people not having enough. So I take the second and third riders to be describing the way things are throughout Gospel age until Christ comes again and opens the book and brings His kingdom.

The fourth rider is somewhat similar. The fourth rider is riding a pale horse. The pale horse represents death. Revelation 6:8 says its name was death, and Hades was following close behind. They are given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine, plague and by the wild beasts of the earth. These are obviously signs of death and destruction. They are the way people die. They are the way hardship comes to the world. The image is drawn from Ezekiel. For example, in Ezekiel 5:12-17 the Lord says to Ezekiel about the punishment of Jerusalem that a third of the people will die by plague or perish by famine or fall by the sword within the walls and another third will be scattered throughout the winds in pursuit of the drawn sword. You recognize the same imagery there. Ezekiel 14:21 says, "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: How much worse will it be when I send against Jerusalem my four dreadful judgments—sword and famine and wild beasts and plague—to kill its men and their animals!" So these images are four proverbial instruments of God's judgment that strike the earth.

The gist of it all is that there will be: warfare, according to the red horse; scarcity, according to the black horse; and death, according to the pale horse. Those are the marks of the Gospel age. You might say we solved our medical complexes and we have cured disease. After all, people do not die of smallpox or tuberculosis anymore. We have figured things out today. But if you know elderly people you know that we have not solved the problem of death. We have only delayed it. Furthermore, we sadly do not really know how to handle some of the things that come about as we senselessly prolong peoples' lives. I am not in favor of euthanasia, but I do know that people are often tortured by misguided efforts to preserve their last three months or six weeks of life. You only need to look inside a hospital to know that we are

not all better. We have not solved the problem of illness. A friend of mine says if you wake up and you are past 40, and you do not feel aches and pains, then you are in heaven. This is the way the world is.

But is that all there is to it? Is there anything else to be said? Is it just disease and scarcity and war? Is that all? Can we come back to the white horse? There is a rider on a white horse and this is one of those things that is widely debated. The rider on the white horse comes first. It is the first one released. Some people think that the rider on the white horse is Jesus. Some people think that the rider on the white horse is the antichrist. That is how much variation there is in the interpretation of the book of Revelation. Let me suggest why the rider would be Jesus. The rider would be Jesus because it is white and white is pure as Jesus is pure. He is associated with whiteness and purity. The rider goes out to conquer in Revelation 5:5, which is just a few verses earlier. You also read that the Lion has conquered. The rider has a crown, and Jesus wears crowns in the book of Revelation. The rider in Revelation 19:11 is kind of like this rider and that rider is certainly Jesus. If it is not Jesus, all you have is unremitting tragedy from opening the seals. It is claimed that there must be some good news among the seals, so Jesus fits that need.

Yet maybe the rider is not Jesus. For one thing, the rider is part of the seals on the scroll, but Jesus is the One who opens the seals. So it does not make much sense to have Jesus opening the seals and being one of the seals. You could also say that if this is Jesus, He is not marked out very well. In Revelation 1, it is very clear that it is Jesus. In Revelation 19 it is clear that it is Jesus. Why is it not more clear that this is Jesus? Furthermore, He seems to be lumped in with the other riders in the group and the others are all bad. How can this one be so different from the other riders? Some people point to the idea that authority was given to him, which is the way the allies of Satan are usually described. In chapters 12 and 13 they are given authority by the beast, and the beast is given authority by the dragon, and so forth. So people suggest that it is like Jesus, but is really counterfeiting Jesus.

A third view, which I hold, is that the rider is not Jesus, but neither is he bad like the others. Notice how it says simply of the first rider that he is riding a white horse. He is given a bow and a crown and he goes out as a conqueror bent on conquest. Among these things, white is good. A bow is never a bad symbol in the book of Revelation, or really anywhere else. It does signify warfare, but after all it says he is going out to conquer. Crowns are generally good and conquest is generally a good thing. Jesus is called the one who conquers. Through Christ we are more than conquerors. Conquering is generally a good thing in the Bible. If somebody conquers he is usually good. So I take this rider on a white horse who has a crown and is conquering as indeed doing something good. He is doing some good conquests.

The sum of the imagery of Revelation comes from the New Testament. You will notice that the book of Revelation seems to be getting its imagery about human history in Revelation 6 from Matthew. Matthew 24 is called Jesus' Olivet Discourse, or eschatological discourse. It is often taken to be His discussion of the end times. If you read it carefully, however, you notice that many, if not all, of the prophecies in Matthew 24 are fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem. They are at least partially fulfilled by the year 70 AD.

The things that are predicted include wars, in Matthew 24:6. Here in Revelation 6 we have wars. We have famines described in Matthew 24:7 and in Revelation 6:6. We have earthquakes in Matthew 24:7 and pestilence in Revelation 6:8, which is the only clear difference between the two narratives. There is persecution in Matthew 24:9 and in Revelation 6:9-10. There is travail in the heavens, signs of destruction and an unraveling of things in the heavens in Matthew 24:29 and in Revelation 6:12-14. And finally in Matthew 24:14 it says that the Gospel will go to all the nations. That is the one clearly positive thing in Matthew 24. It is very possible, and I think it does indeed match up with the first rider who also is the one positive thing. Is it not true that the march of human history includes conquest, some of which

is bloodshed and warfare and senseless violence, like the red horse, but some of which is good? There is good conquest taking place. Are not Christians called more than conquerors? Do not we take the Gospel to the nations? Do we not, at least in a preliminary way, begin to bring people to obedience to Christ's reign? That is not the dominant thing in this age, but there is real progress. There are far more Christians today that name the name of God and claim God as Savior today than at any other point in human history. So I take it that the first rider is indeed not Christ himself, but neither is it the antichrist. It is a description of the fact that some good conquest takes place. A rider on a white horse with a crown with authority and going out to conquer is doing good conquering work.

The fifth seal is another mark of this age, which is the persecution of the Church. Revelation 6:9-11 says,

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 number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

Consider the whole Gospel age. There is always persecution going on, though you may think it is not so today. In fact, some people think there are more Christians being persecuted right now than ever before. In the Sudan right now there is terrible suffering of the Christians. This is an age like every age, an age of persecution.

The sixth seal opens the avenging judgment and is described in Revelation 6:12-17. There is a great earthquake. The sun turned black, the moon turned like blood, the stars in the sky fell to the earth, the sky receded like a scroll and every mountain and island was removed from its place. What does that sound like? If you have read the Old Testament, it sounds like the end of the world. The sky is falling, the stars are falling, and the moon is turned to blood and so on. The kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, and the mighty, along with every slave and every ordinary free man, hid in caves and among rocks in the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks crying, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!" The day of their wrath is coming. Who can stand?

I have thought a couple times about the way I would like to die and about some ways I would not like to die. My favorite way of dying is to die of a heart attack on a tennis court. Or failing that, another good way would be being in my right mind and having sudden death. On the bad end, I would say that being buried alive would be really low on my list. It is definitely in the bottom five. But the kings, the rich, the mighty, the generals are saying they would rather be buried alive under a mountain than face the wrath of the Lamb. It is not even the wrath of the Lion, but the wrath of the Lamb who is slain. But they did not take the opportunity to repent, which is going to be a theme throughout the book of Revelation. They did not take the opportunity to repent and now the day to repent is over and it is a day of wrath and they would rather be buried alive than look at the Lamb. But they will have to look at the Lamb. And they will have to render an account for their body. This is a description of the last day. We have come to the end of human history. The book of Revelation does not march step by step through history. It moves around. It is the way God sees the world. God does not see the world in order from 1898 to 1899 to 1900 to 1901. That is not the way He sees it. He sees everything. He sees beyond the end of time and He sees before the beginning of time. He sees all things present to Him at all times. It is not that He is unmoved by it or becomes passive or distant. He still cares about what He sees. But He is not wondering what is

going to happen next. He is the master of time. He made time. So when He gives a vision of the way He sees human history, He is not bound by time. As He looks at human history, these are the tragedies and the triumphs and this is where it is going. The day of the wrath of the Lamb is where it is going. Then he poses a question. The day of their wrath has come, and who can stand? Chapter 7 gives an answer.

Chapter 7 gives the answer twice over and it takes us back before the last day. Who can stand? Revelation 7:1 says, "After this I saw four angels standing." Angels can stand in the presence of God. They are not afraid of the wrath of the Lamb. They are doing God's work. They are holding back the wind that blows on the land and the sea. And that is not all. There is another group that is standing. They are described in Revelation 7:11. All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and around the four living creatures. There is somebody else standing as well. It is the people of God, in Revelation 7:9. "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb." This is now a description of the redeemed. The kings and the mighty men and the rich and the generals and the slaves and the freeman cannot stand the wrath of the Lamb. But the people of God stand, and they are not afraid. There is nothing to fear for them. They are covered by the Lamb's blood and they love the Lamb and they love God and God loves them and God comforts them. So the redeemed stand with the angels praising God.

Revelation 6:9-11 describes the suffering in the world until the last day until the number is fulfilled of those who must die in persecution. Chapter 7 describes them a different way. The different description is now that they are sealed. They are protected. The angels are holding back the wind and they are wearing white robes and they are holding palm branches in their hand. They are praising God and they are saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb." They are praising God. There is nothing they are afraid of.

Who are these people standing and praising God unafraid? Revelation 7:14 tells us they are those who have come out of the great tribulation, who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. They will never again be hungry or thirsty. The sun will not beat down on them. The Lamb will lead them to springs of living water and will wipe every tear from their eyes. Who are they? They are the 144,000, of the 12 tribes of Israel. They are the 12 tribes of Israel beginning with Judah and they are the 12 pillars of the church. They are all the saints from the Old Testament and all the saints from the New Testament in all their number. They are not a literal 144,000, that is just a good big round number. It is everyone, whether they have been persecuted and died or not. It is all the people who have suffered tribulation. It is all the people of God. This is not a particular time we are thinking of. This is just a picture of all of God's people standing before God.

In Revelation 6 the seals reveal trouble and hardship. Chapter 7 reveals that whatever trouble and hardship come, God's people stand before Him, protected by Him and praising Him. That is the way God sees the world. That is the sixth seal.