

## September 24<sup>th</sup>: Revelation 6-8

### Chapter 6

We now begin 3 series of seven-fold calamities brought to the earth (7 seals, 7 trumpets, and 7 bowls). It's possible that these three different cycles are simply describing the same "end of the world" calamities from a different vantage point (ratcheting up the intensity of the image with each cycle).

The calamities begin with the first 4 seals breaking open and calling forth the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." John borrowed the horsemen imagery from Zechariah (where there are several horsemen who are God's messengers), but beyond the fact that they are horsemen, they bear little resemblance to one another in purpose. The Four Horsemen are the first 4 calamities to befall the world, the beginning of the end. The first horseman, on a white horse, symbolizes military conquest (bow, crown, white are all symbolic of military victory over one's enemies). The second horseman, on a red horse, shatters peace (symbolizing war). This horseman is the symbol of humans slaughtering one another through any means (internal or external conflict). Conquering and War lead naturally into the third horseman, famine, who rides a black horse and carries a pair of scales (that which merchants would use to weigh grains). Famine destroys wheat and barley (fast growing crops that need to be replanted every year), but is not permitted to touch wine and olive oil (slower growing crops, less susceptible to famine). The prices noted (1 quart of wheat for a day's wages) are exorbitant, this would have meant a worker would have worked a full day to provide only for enough wheat for themselves, and have nothing left for their family. Meanwhile, oil and wine, symbols of luxury and excess, would be untouched ("Let them eat cake!"). The fourth horseman rides a chlorine green (sickly, yellowish green) horse. This rider is Death, which can also be translated as Pestilence. The result of Conquest, War, Famine, and Pestilence is that ¼ of the Earth's inhabitants are killed.

The opening of the fifth seal reveals not what's happening on earth, but in heaven. John sees under the altar in heaven the lives (souls is a poor translation) of the martyrs who were killed for testifying to their faith (like Antipas), crying out to God for vindication. Underneath the altar of heaven symbolizes a place of prestige and honor, they are near God. This is a message of assurance for all who cry out, "How long, O Lord?" God has not forgotten the faithful witness who made sacrifices for him. "When the number is completed" could imply both the patience of God and the correlation between the extent of evil and the equivalent measure of judgment. The white robes symbolize purity and victory for these martyrs who wait for God's vindication.

The opening of the sixth seal leads to cataclysmic, cosmic consequences. "The Day of the Lord" is here, as described by the prophet Joel, Esdras (in the Apocrypha), and Jesus. The entire cosmos is shaken up and acting abnormally now. Those who are still on the earth so fear the righteous judgment of God, that they ask the rocks to fall on them, rather than face God. While the whole world experiences this suffering, particular emphasis is placed on the prestigious (the kings, magnates, generals, rich, and powerful). These are the ones whose unjust actions have led to the deaths of God's faithful ones. "Who can stand?" Without Jesus, no one can stand.

## Chapter 7

Four is the number of the earth, the angels hold back damage to the earth, sea, and trees until the faithful have been “sealed.” This word is the same word as the seals on the scroll, akin to God’s will and purposes. To bear the seal of God means to be protected by God, but it also means to give God our ultimate allegiance and commitment to God. This is God claiming the faithful as God’s children, and placing an indelible seal upon them. It was believed that at the end time the 12 tribes of Israel would reassemble (remember after the Assyrian exile in 721 BC 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel were never seen or heard from again). Here, there are 12,000 from each tribe being sealed.... This is likely a symbolic number for “a whole lot of perfect”. In the next verses, we see a “great multitude from every nation”, symbolic of God’s Gentile faithful from every race and tribe around the world. This is a great myriad of people, not limited by number. This passage echoes earlier heavenly scenes from chapters 4-5 where the whole throng of heaven is singing and worshipping the Lamb. This is the heavenly scene circling back around. The throng robed in white are the ones who have come through the great ordeal breaking out on earth. God’s beloved children are not beamed up to heaven and spared all of the calamity, but God carries them through it until they take their place in the heavenly throng of saints. Vs. 15-17 is reminiscent of Isaiah. God promises to wipe away all tears.

## Chapter 8

The 7<sup>th</sup> seal is finally opened, and there is nothing but silence. All of heaven and earth is hushed in anticipation for what the ushering in of God’s kingdom will at last look like. Some believe this silence is a symbol of the expectation that at the end there will be a “return to primeval silence” for 7 days until God creates the world anew. Next, 7 angels with 7 war bugles assemble. Another angels was given a bowl of incense containing the prayers of the martyrs, which rose up to God. The martyr’s prayers for justice directly bring on such justice in the form of fire and thunder and lightning being thrown down from heaven in judgment by that same angel, as a kind of prelude to the wrath to come from the 7 trumpets/bugles. The 7 trumpets should be viewed not as new calamities, but as an intensified view of the same set of end time events. There are intensified consequences to this set of wrath –instead of ¼ of the world’s population dying, now 1/3 of humanity dies. This intensification ratchets up the drama of the narrative, giving the hearer/reader the sense that this story is drawing toward its conclusion. The set of wrath brought on by the trumpets is modeled after God’s judgment of Egypt. John is writing possibly only 20 years after Mt. Vesuvius erupted in Pompeii, it’s possible that he’s modelling the “burning mountain” on what he remembers from that disaster. The first trumpet blast burns up the vegetation, the second burns up the salt waters (even the ships!). The third trumpet blast makes the fresh water undrinkable (poisoned like wormwood). This is a reversal of God’s activity in the Sinai wilderness, when God transformed the bitter water into fresh water (Exodus 15:22-25). The fourth trumpet affects celestial bodies, bringing partial darkness to the earth (reminiscent of the 9<sup>th</sup> plague of Egypt which blot out the sun, moon, and stars and brought darkness over the Egyptians). These calamities only affect 1/3 of their targets, suggesting that these are “warning shots”, this is not complete judgment, but rather a warning to bring the people to repentance.

An “eagle” (or vulture) now flies across the scene declaring “Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, at the blast of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!” The vulture would certainly make sense with the theme of death and destruction, but the eagle was a symbol of Roman power and pride. The trumpet blasts to come will be even worse than those which have already sounded. “Woe” in the prophetic language always meant “Death is certain.” Revelation uses it in this way to warn the people of what is to come.