

Commentary on the Revelation

- I. Prologue, 1:1-20
 - A. The Introduction, vv. 1-3
 - B. The Salutation, vv. 4-8
 - C. The Vision, vv. 9-20
 - II. “The Things Which Are,” 2:1-3:22
 - III. “The Things That Shall be,” 4:1-22:5
 - A. The divine right to judge and reward, 4:1-5:14
 - 1. God and the heavenly throne, 4:1-11
 - 2. Jesus, God, and the scroll of judgment, 5:1-14
 - B. The divine judgment of God’s enemies, 6:1-19:21
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Preliminaries: A Look at the whole before the parts.

How to approach the judgment section by the lamb upon the world of unbelievers, eventually crushing all opposition, has occasioned endless discussion and controversy. What can be said about this extended section is as follows:

1. The various judgments that are described, a cycle of three, are deeply interconnected with chapters four and five. Those chapters describe that fact of judgment to come and who is alone worthy to execute them resulting in the cleansing of the earth once more (remember Noah, remember the Babylonian Captivity), this time permanently as the book ends with God dwelling among His people forever in the new paradise of God.
2. It is clear that the three judgment cycles are interconnected because the seventh seal and the seventh trumpet led to the first trumpet and first bowl (sometimes the word is translated “vial”) respectively.
3. It is also evident that the three judgment cycles end with salvation, in the sense of protection or deliverance, of God’s people. Through three judgments sequences redemption comes to God’s people three times in various ways. The three form interludes after the judgments to comfort the readers. The cycles can be summarized as judgment, persecution, and salvation. At the conclusion of each cycle there is a description of the final judgment in the Lord’s return (6:12-17, 11:15-18, 16:17-21).

The seals (6:1-17)-----protection (7:1-17)

The trumpet (8:6-9:21)--protection and triumph (10:1-11:13)

The Bowls (15:5-16:21)-----final victory declared (19:1-22:5)

4. It is likely no coincidence that the four OT books that John quotes the most (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah) have the same structural form of repetitious cycles in them.
 5. With each cycle the intensity of the judgments increase as does the clarity and explanation of the comfort. Simply put, there is progress in both emphases within the three cycles.
 6. The interconnectedness of chapters 4 and 5 with 6:1-22:5 is important interpretatively as we proceed through the book. Jesus's right to judge God's enemies and bring ultimate blessing to His people was granted because of His worthiness. Chapters 6-10 flows from the enthronement scenes of 4 and 5.
 7. Also, remember that the point that John is seeking to convey throughout the book is that troubled believers should find comfort in the realization that the God who expresses grace and mercy through redemption is the God that also in justice and holiness has vowed to crush every one of His enemies. The book is about comfort and the need for strength in times of serious distress by assuring the people of God that Christ has won their victory through His death and the proof of it is His victory over it evidenced by the resurrection. The book's purpose is spiritual and moral encouragement by providing insight into the future, ultimate triumph of God.
 8. It is important to remember Rev 1:1 as you approach these series of judgments with its graphic descriptions. It is a communication concerning present and future things through symbols and visions. This verse tells us that God's intent is "to show or communicate," truth through symbols or signs. Visionary literature is to be approached as in interpreting parables (look for the main point understanding that the details of the story are the outward shell for conveying the point of the story).
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1. The first cycle: the seal judgments, 6:1-8:5

In the initial four seals, those around the throne of God, ranks of angelic beings ("living creatures"), add to their worship at the throne their affirmation of the subsequent action by commanding it. This seems to separate seals 1-4 from 5-7. Further, the symbolic meaning of the number four, like, seven, is that of fullness or completeness. Judgments fall upon the earth in judgments 1-4, but the scene changes to heaven and the martyred in the fifth and the final judgment in the sixth.

The central point of the seals has been stated this way by Hamilton. "God is just, and he will justly repay all the ways his glory has been despised and his holiness defiled (176)." The emphasis in the seal judgments is not on people, but the disasters that will come upon the world.

If Dan 7:2-8 and Zechariah 6:1-8 is the background of John's thinking, the description of four evil beasts and four horsemen respectively, the four horsemen represent evil kingdoms that wage war on the saints until the time that the Ancient of Days grants authority to judge the world (Dan 2, Rev 4-5).

The four horses and the four beasts are also identified with the “four winds (Rev. 7:1);” they symbolize nations deceived into destructive behavior toward believers and, therefore, face judgment.

The initial four seals have a common sequence: the voice of one of the four living creatures who invite the opening of each seal.

a. The first seal (the deceiver), 6:1-2

Some have identified the rider on the white horse as Christ (white suggestive of righteousness and holiness). However, the context of the seals is about judgment on God’s enemies. This is consistent with OT symbolism found in Zech. 6:1-8, four groups of horses of varying colors (though the sequence differs). The first four seals, trumpets, and bowls seem parallel and, in each case, it suggests acts instigated by the devil and his minions (seal one would be out of sync if it is Christ). It is true that Christ, in opening the seal, causes the subsequent tragedy, but He is not the immediate doer of it. The only similarity between 19:11-21 and the horse here is the color (white); however, the theme of the seal is deception. Further the word for “crowns” in the two passages is not the same and neither is the armament or context.

With a variety of OT passages as the background, the judgment seems to be the deception of the nations by removing peace from among them instigating chaos and tragedy. John has already told His readers in his first letter that many “antichrists” are already in the world (4:1-3).

b. The second seal (civil war), vv. 3-4

It could be that the description of the first rider is in summary form and the subsequent three seals add detail and greater explanation. This judgment seems to be the fruit of the deception in the first seal judgment, the removal of peace from the world. While the gospel brings peace, the adversary of Christ brings destruction, symbolized by the color red. Here the emphasis seems to be internal chaos among nations (internecine conflict).

c. The third seal (famine), vv. 5-6

A consequent of war is often famine (hence, these judgments seem to be linked together). Judging from the purchasing power of a denarius, a days’ wage, the famine was not utterly devastating, a quart of wheat could sustain a family for a day and three quarts of barley for three days (perhaps this specificity is pressing a vision toward too much literalism). It seems like the Christians at Smyrna who have become economically impoverished (2:9). “Do not harm the oil and wine” suggests that they are to be carefully preserved and used wisely

d. The fourth seal (pestilence and death), vv. 7-8

The “ashen horse (i.e., sickness)” brings death and for those who experience a final judgment, “death” here likely entailing pestilence

and contagious diseases (the Hebrew equivalent term is “plague” reflecting a story of Egyptian bondage and release). This seal (v. 8) can be read as a summary of the previous ones in consequence. The judgments thus far are partial in nature because the devastation is limited to a “fourth.”

- e. The fifth seal (a look into heaven, the true temple, the presence of God), vv. 9-11
 - 1) The presence of martyred saints, (v. 9)

With this seal the scene changes from earth to heaven, from judge on earth to the reaction of saints in heaven to it (the term translated “killed” is actually “murdered” [“slay” in vv. 4, 9 and “kill” in vv. 8, 11]). Likely, these are the martyred who are in John’s vision in the presence of God (“under the altar”), suggesting divine protection from the harm they have endured for their faithfulness to the message of divine redemption through Christ’s death and resurrection (the subject of their worship in Rev. 5).
 - 2) The prayer of the martyred saints, v. 10

The cry or prayer of the saints (v.10) is not for revenge, but for divine justice; it is the honor and integrity of God to punish wickedness and it is their interest also. Christ would be unjust if He did not act against those who would cause His people to suffer!
 - 3) The request of the martyred saints, v. 11

The context of the initial four seals must be between the enthronement of Christ and the final judgment by Christ because the saints are told to wait for the execution of justice. This would suggest that the persecution of the saints is ongoing and the seals describe other than the final judgment.
- f. The sixth seal (natural disasters, terror), vv. 12-17

What is found in the seal is the answer to the prayers of the saints from the previous seal. How long must they wait? Clearly, this seal brings us to the final judgment (“the great day,” v. 17). See also 11:18, the sixth trumpet, for a similar phrase. The judgment is poured out on the unbelieving world because of the persecution of the saints. What is here described is the dissolution of the cosmos.

 - 1) The destruction of the solar system, vv. 12-14a
 - 2) The destruction of the earth, v. 14b
 - 3) The reaction of unbelievers, vv. 15-16
 - 4) The cause of the destruction, v. 17

Applications:

1. The most poignant issue raised in this chapter is the problem of evil, its relationship to the character of God as holy and good. What is clear is that God sovereignly uses evil to accomplish His purposes. Further, He uses His adversaries as His agents. There are things far beyond our comprehension and this matter is one of them. What this book

does is show us the final outcome of all the things we do not and cannot understand. God calls us to trust Him that He has a plan for us that will carry each of us through our “sojourn from Egypt, the land of bondage” to the “promised land.” Are you trusting God’s divine character, incomprehensible wisdom, and absolute sovereignty or are you limiting the comfort of God to the thimble measure of your strength and knowledge?

2. How can He judge people for the evil they do when He is active in causing the circumstances, not directly but through His servants, even the devil? People, even fallen angels, are not held accountable for their actions by the limits of their ability, but by their willingness to do what appears to them the best. Motive determines the virtue of action and when it is contrary to God, it is evil. We are accountable for our choices, but God controls, directly or indirectly, the objects presented to us. The issue is not whether we have ability to make choices, that we certainly do; it is, are we making Godly choices in a world contrary to the character of God? What kind of choices are you making?
3. It seems clear that we live in a world where things are broken, our media sources full of evidence from CNN to the small-town newspaper. Behind the tragedies of this world from war, to disease, to the drug culture, to divorce is the devil, the rider of the white horse in our passage, the red dragon in chapter 12. He has been given momentary, restricted rule over this world; though limited, it, at times, looks predominate, universal, and everlasting. Our enemy is real; he is not running around with a witch fork, floppy ears, and a long tail. What are you doing to recognize His efforts to derail you and prevent Christ from shining forth His brilliance in your life? He is the master of fear; he is the “fly in the ointment” of social disintegration. Do you see fear, anger, desire to hurt as your right, or the intrusion of your archenemy?
4. The point of the book is to encourage us to persevere in our struggles to remain faithful and active in our witness for Christ. To accomplish this goal the book removes the clouds of our immediate experience to show us that God is actively involved in this world moving time to a closure and the earth to its new creation. Do you see this world as spiraling to oblivion or a world in which God is gathering His people to be with Him forever? Do you take comfort that God is doing something beyond our ability to grasp and accomplishing His will in perfection and complexity? Do you see the beauty in this world or the mere ugliness that is yet to be changed?
5. While Christians have a wonderful destiny, the walk toward it is imaged for us by the ancient people’s journey through the Sinai wilderness to the Transjordan. This means that troubles will be within our experience until we enter the “promised land.” The kingdom has arrived in the triumphant, resurrected, enthroned Christ, but not fully as in a future day. Jesus said it well, “In this life you will have trouble (literally “tribulation).” Satan reigns still though in a limited sense. Does this help you to understand that God has not promised us a life that is care free, pain-free, or sadness removed? God sets the limits and duration of pain and sorrow, disappointment and fear, death and destruction.
6. The picture of the saints in heaven praying that God would act in judgment upon His enemies, and praising God in doing so, is instructive for us who, unlike them, are enduring the adverse circumstances that they have been delivered from forever. They are not asking for revenge, which is self-centered, but for justice which is holy and right. When we see wrong, either in our families or neighborhoods, we should pray that God would act in justice to punish and correct the injustice. It is not wrong to ask for the divine wrath of God for His glory; it is wrong to seek revenge for hurt. The difference between revenge and justice is that one is human centered and the other God centered. Do you cry out for revenge or God’s glory and justice to prevail in our broken world?

Revenge seeks adjudication for personal affronts. Vengeance does not consider that God uses wrong for our good and the good of others. The request for divine justice is a petition for God's glory to be revealed!

7. "How long" is a phrase worth pondering in our passage today. I think we all wonder when "enough is enough" for all of us who have tears of brokenness, disabilities, pain, and sorrow, whether it be personal, family, friends, or nation. It is a human emotion that strikes us to the very inner fiber of our being. The answer is that God knows what is best and His timing is perfect. We have no problem believing this retrospectively, because we see positive outcomes. However, why is it that no matter how many times we see that good has come from sadness and evil, that we do not view the next sadness with the same perspective as the collectivity of all our past experiences? I think we all need the lesson of patience. Patience obtains what hurray cannot! Have you learned that lesson? Are there areas in your life where that lesson needs to be applied?