

Understanding the Seven Seals

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There are four major series of "Sevens" in the book of Revelation:

Seven Letters to the Seven *Ecclesias* (Churches)
Seven Seals
Seven Trumpets
Seven Bowls (Seven Last Plagues)

John's method of explanation must be carefully studied or one can be misled in the interpretation of each of these series, including their relationship to one another.

The Seven Trumpets are introduced out of the Seventh Seal. The Seven Bowls (Plagues) are introduced out of the Seventh Trumpet. The question arises, are these series of "Sevens" to be considered in the chronological sequence in which they appear or are they parallel.

As we study we will see that they are parallel but each series amplifies and clarifies the same categories of events which not only become more destructive with each series, but they also involve more of the earth with each subsequent series. Each series ends with the Second Coming of Christ.

The Seals involve one-fourth of the earth. The Trumpets involve one-third of the earth. The Bowls (Plagues) involve the whole earth, except for the small group who refuse to take the Mark of the Beast.

Briefly, the Seven Seals depict the persecution of the true followers of Christ by their enemies. The Seven Seals contain God's encouragement and promises and rewards to those who stand firm for Him until the end. The first four Seals are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

The Seven Trumpets depict God's judgment against those who have persecuted God's people. The Seven Trumpets are a warning to the wicked to turn back to God.

The Seven Bowls (Plagues) depict the full measure of God's judgment on the wicked, or better stated, they depict the wicked beginning to reap what they have sown in full measure culminating in the complete destruction of the earth and all of its inhabitants, with the exception of those who have refused the Mark of the Beast.

Bible commentators frequently point to the parallel structure of the seven seals in Rev. 6 with Jesus' prophetic discourse on the Mount of Olives in Matt 24 and Mark 13, often termed the Olivet Discourse. When we compare the two passages, the one in Rev 6 and the one in the Gospels, we must consider the successive seals in Rev. 6 as Christ's further unfolding of His earlier speech in which He had outlined to His disciples what would happen to them during their mission in the world.

In Israel's past God had sent four judgments on His rebellious covenant people: war, plague, famine and death (by disease) (Lev 16:23-26; Deut 32:23-25, 42; Ezek. 14:12-14, 21) But these judgments were never God's final judgment. These served as preliminary judgments, to motivate His wayward people to return to God.

Seven Seals:

The Four Horsemen: Each time Christ opens one of the first four seals, one of the four seraphs calls out "in a voice like a thunder:" "Come!" (Not - "Come up here." The seraph is speaking to the horse and rider, not to God's people as the "Rapturists" believe). In response, four horses come consecutively, each in a different color: white, red, black and pale. Each horse carries a different rider. Each horse appears to join the previous ones sent, so that finally all four horses ride together on earth until Jesus comes.

First Seal: The White horse

Some modern scholars interpret this rider as a symbol of man's lust for power and world domination. Some say this white horse and rider represent Christ, but others counter saying that it seems "inappropriate to the context" to see Christ in this setting in the Seals.

We must remember again our dependence on our other known Biblical symbols that places Christ as the Warrior in Rev. 19:11-16 as the meaningful counterpart and end-time finality of Rev. 6:2.

Therefore, we interpret the white horse of the first seal as the horse carrying the gospel, offering Christ's righteousness to all men and confirming that He is the "conqueror bent on conquest" (Rev. 6:2). God WILL accomplish what He has set out to do, He WILL "take away the sin of the world." (John 1:29)

The Second Seal: The Red horse

"Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. Rev 6:3,4

"The next three apocalyptic riders have authority to bring severe judgments on the earth. We should not consider these forays that produce death, famine and plague, as the results of secular wars.

"The **red** horse represents the spirit of opposition to the gospel rider, or **war against the people of Christ**. Jesus had warned that the witness of His followers would cause bitter opposition: 'Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.' " (Matt 10:34) End Time Prophecies of the Bible, by Hans LaRondelle, pg 126,127

The understanding that the red horse means religious-political persecution for the sake of Christ is confirmed by Christ's letter to the church in Smyrna and the cry of the slain martyrs under the fifth seal. (Rev 6:9)

Wherever Jesus is rejected, the results are violence and bloodshed, not only within the church but in society.

The Third Seal: The Black horse

"I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine." (Rev 6:5,6)

The symbol is taken from Lev 26:26, where it refers first to God's judgment on a rebellious people, that will suffer from a literal famine (see also Ezek. 4:16). The Bible also uses the scales to symbolize a heavenly verdict (Dan 5:27).

This third rider announces a famine of God's Word and Spirit among God's followers, suggesting they will become weak in the truth of the gospel replacing it by a doctrinal belief system called orthodoxy. Doctrines and ceremonies never feed the soul, as Christ warned in His letter to the church in Pergamum (Rev 2:14-16)

"Do not damage the oil and the wine!" (Rev 6:6) is likely telling us that God protects His gospel in a time of spiritual scarcity.

The Fourth Seal: The Pale (green) horse

"I looked and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades (the grave) was following close behind him. They were given power over a FOURTH OF THE EARTH, to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth (Rev 6:7,8).

The color of "deathly pale" suggests a continued state of spiritual decline and a greater hardening of the heart leading to apostasy. Heresies and errors come in as a consequence of rejecting the truth of the gospel. The "wild beasts" are a symbolic anticipation of the persecuting beasts of Rev. 13 which were also "given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them" (Rev 13:7,14,15). The fourth rider gathers the results of the work of the previous riders: death and doom. LaRondelle, pg 127

"Once released, each horse continues to ride until the Second Coming." Roy Naden (The Lamb Among the Beasts, p. 110).

The Fifth Seal: Read Rev 6: 9-11

The martyrs' cry, "How long . . . until you avenge our blood?" (Rev 6:10) corresponds to the same cry in Daniel 8, "How long will it take for the vision. . . of the host that will be trampled underfoot?" (Rev 8:13)

The fifth seal reveals that the time for vindication of God's people must wait "a little longer," because the end-time persecution has not yet come (Rev 6:11).

Why did the martyrs die?

"Because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained" (Rev 6:9). John uses the term "testimony" regularly for the testimony which Jesus Himself gave. The book of Revelation itself is called Jesus' "testimony for the *ecclesias* (churches)" (Rev 22:16).

John writes that he was on the island of Patmos "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rev 1:9). This indicates that the broader sense of the testimony of

Jesus is "the gospel as the revelation of Christ's life and work" (G Pfandl, in Symposium on Revelation, II:310).

The martyrs suffer a violent death because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus which they maintained (Rev 6:9).

The Sixth Seal: (Read Rev 6:12-17) Earthquake, sun turned black, moon turned to blood, falling stars.

The Sixth Seal reveals Christ's response to the cry of the "souls under the altar" (Rev 6:10). He announces His arrival as a Divine Warrior with the same cosmic signs in heaven and on earth as God did when He appeared as Israel's King on Mount Sinai:

"There was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled . . . Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder (Exod. 19:16, 18-19).

"This description by Moses was adopted by Israel's prophets as the archetype of all subsequent manifestations of God. They portrayed each visitation of the Lord on behalf of His people with cosmic signs similar to the episode on Mount Sinai. Besides the earthquake and the thunder, they could add a hailstorm, a heavy rainfall, the sudden drying up of a river, a terrifying panic among the enemies of God and His people, and even sun, moon and stars as participating in God's holy warfare on behalf of His people (see Josh. 3:13; 4:22-24; 5:1; Judg 5:20, 21; 1 Sam 7:10; 14:15, 20; Josh. 10:11-14) This cosmic aspect gave dramatic proof that the covenant God was also the Creator of heaven and earth." LaRondelle, pg 132

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus ended His prophetic forecast with the following assurance:

"Immediately AFTER the distress of those days the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. AT THAT TIME, the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky . . ." (Matt 24:29,30).

The supernatural celestial signs would immediately introduce and accompany His coming. There is no suggestion in Matt. 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 that the celestial signs are warning signs to repent and prepare for His coming. George Knight summed it up appropriately: "Thus the pattern of Matthew 24 appears to be that the *real* signs are not signs of nearness but of *coming*. The less precise signs are to encourage believers to keep watching, waiting, and working." (*Matthew*, p. 237)

The Sixth Seal appears to reveal that there will be universal destruction of all humanity. All people cry out, "Who can stand?" (Rev 6:17) The answer to this question is given in Rev 7.

The sixth seal opens with: "There was a great earthquake" (Rev 6:12). This apocalyptic earthquake is sharply distinguished from all earlier, local earthquakes which Jesus had announced as the "beginning of birth pains" (Matt 24:7,8; Mark 13:8).

In Rev 6:15-17, John describes the global impact of the cosmic quake on the political, military, economic, and social world.

The Sixth seal is the consummation of the earlier seals. The cry for vindication by the martyrs in the Fifth Seal is answered in the Sixth Seal, a day of reckoning and justice against those who have persecuted God's people.

¹² And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood;

¹³ And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casts her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind.

¹⁴ And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.

¹⁵ And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains;

¹⁶ And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb:

¹⁷ For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?

Rev 6:12-17

The Seventh Seal:

The Seventh Seal, beginning in Rev. 8, brings "silence in heaven for about half an hour" (Rev 8:1) A "half an hour" in prophetic time is seven days. This silence suggests that the justice of God has been fully executed, divine justice has answered the cry of the martyrs, "How long?" The Seventh Seal ends with the coming of Jesus.

Revelation 7

Revelation 7 contains an interlude in the Seals' cycle which answers the question of Rev 6:17, "Who can stand?" Revelation 7 is to encourage God's people to persevere in their faith in Christ until the end.

These passages assure Christ's followers that the plagues will not destroy all of mankind. They imply the separation of a God-worshiping group of Christians from the nominal Christians. Divine protection is essential if the last generation of God's people is to stand unharmed during the outpouring of God's wrath.

Here in Chapter 7 we, for the first time, find a group called the "144,000" true Israelites. (The word "Israel" means "upright with God." The word "Israel" does not mean "Jew.")

And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree.

² And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea,

³ Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads.

⁴ And **I heard the number** of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an **hundred and forty and four thousand** of all the tribes of the children of Israel. Rev 7:1-4

Who will understand God's plan? Read Dan 12:10

"... and none of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand."

In order to be "wise" – one must have Wisdom, and Wisdom comes only from God:

"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God. . ." James 1:5

How will God cleanse the righteous? Read Isa 4:3-4

³ And it shall come to pass that *he who is* left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy—everyone who is recorded among the living in Jerusalem.

⁴ When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and purged the blood of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment **and by the spirit of burning**. Isa 4:3-4

² But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appears? for he is like a **refiner's fire**, and like fullers' soap:

³ And **he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver**: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness. Mal 3:2-3

What is this Seal with which God Seals His people? Read what Paul says in Eph 1:13; 4:30 and 2 Cor 1:22

¹³ In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were **sealed** with that holy Spirit of promise, Eph 1:13

³⁰ And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are **sealed** unto the day of redemption. Eph 4:30

Who hath also **sealed** us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts. 2 Cor 1:22

We are sealed with what the translators incorrectly translate as God's "Holy Spirit." The proper translation is God's "Breath of Holiness." (The word used here for "spirit" is defined as *breath or wind* in Strong's Concordance) God breathed physical breath into Adam which gave Adam physical life. And God's breathes "spiritual" breath into us (His "breath of holiness") to give us "spiritual life."

What this really means is that as you truly "search for the Lord with all your heart" and diligently read His Word, slowly He will replace your disposition and character with HIS disposition and character.

That's why the Bible says,

But we all, with open face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, **are changed into the same image** from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." 2 Cor 3:18

In other words, "By Beholding Him, we become changed into His image."

The 144,000

Did John actually SEE the 144,000 (or did he just "hear" those words)? Rev 7:4

"And I **heard the number** of them that were sealed; and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of Israel." Rev 7:4

When John actually SAW - - - it was actually "a great multitude."

"And then I beheld, and lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations and kindreds and people and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands. Rev 7:9

Were these people really from the literal tribes of Israel? What does the word "Israel" mean?

Answer: "Upright with God."

Where else does this pattern of *hearing* - - - then *seeing* occur?

⁵ And one of the elders said unto me (**I heard**), Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof."

⁶ And I beheld (**I saw**), and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth. Rev 5:5-6

Who are the offspring (heirs) of Abraham?

"And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Gal 3:29

What is unique in ALL Scripture about the listing of the twelve tribes in Rev 7?

It places Judah first in line, apparently to stress that Christ is the head of the new Israel (Rev 5:5,6; 7:5). The fact that Dan is omitted and Manasseh is added, although he is already included in Joseph (Rev 7:6,8), again implies its non-literal meaning.

According to Beatrice Neall, "The number 144,000 should thus be understood as a symbol of the unity, perfection, and completion of God's church, complete because the number has been made up (Rev 6:11)." Symposium on Revelation, 262

"The purpose of the "seal of the living God" can better be understood in the perspective of its antecedents in Israel's history. Two crises for Israel, one in Egypt and the other in Jerusalem, provide the historical types to understand the theological significance of the end-time sealing of God's people. To safeguard His covenant people from the angel of death, God had ordered Israel to apply the blood of a lamb on their door posts:

The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you When I strike Egypt (Ex 12:13).

"Here we observe the essence of the end-time sealing. . . No less significant is Ezekiel's vision of six angels sent to Jerusalem to execute the covenant curse of God. The Lord ordered the angels to slaughter all the idolaters in the temple and city. Nevertheless, God's grace was manifested by sending a special angel with a writing kit in advance of the executioners:

"Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it" (Ezek. 9:4).

"Only the sealed ones will survive Armageddon (Rev 16). All the others, the 'dwellers on the earth,' will receive the 'mark of the beast' (Rev 13:15-17). If ALL people receive either the seal of God or the mark of the beast, then no one can remain morally neutral or uninvolved in the final test of faith. This last separation of humanity is expressed in Revelation as follows:

he that is unjust, let him be unjust still
he that is filthy (vile), let him be filthy still
he that is righteous, let him be righteous still
he that is holy, let him be holy still.
Rev 22:11

"This declaration implies that the apocalyptic sealing signifies the ultimate fixation of character. R.H. Charles gave this profound explanation:

In its deepest sense this sealing means the outward manifestation of character. The hidden goodness of God's servants is at last blazoned outwardly, and the divine name that was written in secret by God's Spirit on their hearts is now engraved openly on their brows by the very signet ring of the living God. . . In the reign of Antichrist, goodness and evil, righteousness and sin, come into their fullest manifestation and antagonism. Character ultimately enters on the stage of finality.
(The Rev. of St. John I: 205,206)

Notice also in Revelation 7:14 another important feature of the 144,000.

"These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

"Here every literalism fails. One can never wash a garment white in literal blood. "The blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). This victory of faith is especially assured to the last generation who will go through the great time of trouble." LaRondelle, Chapter 15.

"In the midst of the global outlawing of the followers of the Lamb, this prophecy assures their sudden rescue by the divine Warrior (See Rev 17:14; 19:11-21). Michael will finally rise to wage His holy war and all persecutions in the entire world will be cut short (Dan 12:1; Matt 24:22; Mark 13:20)."

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