

Revelation:

It's Not What You Think It Is [Part 2]

Revelation can be broken up into seven scenes. We will look at an overview of each of them over the next few weeks but here is an overview of the entire book:

Scene 1—The Church, Ch 2-3

Scene 2— Heaven, Ch 4-5

Scene 3—The Seal and Trumpet Plague Cycles, Ch 6-11

- Six seals, break, seventh seal
- Six trumpet plagues, break, seventh trumpet plague

Scene 4—Critique of the Empire/Alternative Vision of Community, Ch 12-15

Scene 5—The Bowl Plague Cycle, Ch 16

- Seven bowls, no break

Scene 6—A Tale of Two Cities: Babylon the Fallen, Ch 17-20

- Defeat of Babylon, victory celebration, defeat of evil

Scene 7—A Tale of Two Cities: The New Jerusalem, Ch 21-22

NOTES: Like I said earlier, Revelation does not unfold in linear fashion. Therefore, the cycles of seals, trumpet plagues, and bowl plagues can be seen as happening simultaneously. They are looking at the same thing from different angles. If any pattern emerges here it is that they grow in intensity as Revelation unfolds.

Scene 1—The Church, Ch 2-3

NOTES: The so-called letters to the seven churches function as prophetic messages, similar to imperial edicts. The pattern for each of the churches is 1) a word of encouragement, 2) a word of rebuke, and 3) a promise for those who remain faithful. All seven messages are intended to be heard by all the churches. These messages furnish our most detailed historical information about each church in late 1st century Asia Minor. Most of the cities named had official Roman imperial altars or temples, promoting worship and allegiance to the empire and emperors. All seven messages are addressed to the "angel" or "messenger" of the church—probably the corporate spirit of each congregation.

Chapter 2: Ephesus, As An Example—[1] Write this to the angel of the church in Ephesus: These are the words of the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven gold lampstands:

Encouragement: [2] I know your works, your labor, and your endurance. I also know that you don't put up with those who are evil. You have tested those who say they are apostles but are not, and you have found them to be liars. [3] You have shown endurance and put up with a lot for my name's sake, and you haven't gotten tired.

Rebuke: [4] You have let go of the love you had at first. [5] So remember the high point from which you have fallen. Change your hearts and lives and do the things you did at first. If you don't, I'm coming to you. I will move your lampstand from its place if you don't change your hearts and lives.

Promise: [7] If you can hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. I will allow those who emerge victorious to eat from the tree of life, which is in God's paradise.

QUESTION: How does the message to the church in Ephesus make you feel? What do you think these letters were designed to do?

Familiar quotes from the seven messages:

Laodicea Letter — Chapter 3 — [15] I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. [16] So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth.

Laodicea Letter — Chapter 3 — [20] Look! I'm standing at the door and knocking. If any hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to be with them, and will have dinner with them, and they will have dinner with me.

Scene 2—Heaven, Ch 4-5

Chapter 4: God's Throne Room—[2] At once I was in a Spirit-inspired trance and I saw a throne in heaven, and someone was seated on the throne. [3] The one seated there looked like jasper and carnelian, and surrounding the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald. [4] Twenty-four thrones, with twenty-four elders seated upon them, surrounded the throne. The elders were dressed in white clothing and had gold crowns on their heads. [5] From the throne came lightning, voices, and thunder. In front of the throne were seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God. [6] Something like a glass sea, like crystal, was in front of the throne.

In the center, by the throne, were four living creatures encircling the throne. These creatures were covered with eyes on the front and on the back. [7] The first living creature was like a lion. The second living creature was like an ox. The third living creature had a face like a human being. And the fourth living creature was like an eagle in flight. [8] Each of the four living creatures had six wings, and each was covered all around and on the inside with eyes. They never rest day or night, but keep on saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is coming."

[9] Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to the one seated on the throne, who lives forever and always, [10] the twenty-four elders fall before the one seated on the throne. They worship the one who lives forever and always. They throw down their crowns before the throne and say, [11] "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, because you created all things. It is by your will that they existed and were created."

QUESTION: What feeling might John be going after with his vivid description of the throne room of heaven? What is he trying to say to those who hear Revelation?

NOTES: John borrows his imagery from the Old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah 6:2 and Ezekiel 1:4-28. Power is the key to this scene. The throne is the central symbol of power in Revelation. The central questions addressed by Revelation are questions of power: "Who is the true Lord of this world?" "To whom does this earth belong?" As political imagery, the heavenly throne room evokes comparisons with the Roman emperor's throne room ceremonies. In Roman imperial throne rooms, worshippers threw their crowns before the emperor as a sign of allegiance, singing hymns and liturgies of praise.

More than fifteen hymns or hymn-like compositions occur throughout Revelation, all giving encouragement to God's people on earth from the perspective of heaven. In the books three-tiered cosmology [heaven, earth, and the Abyss or underworld], events in heaven give direction for how things should be on earth. Revelation's frequent use of hymns, doxologies, and descriptions of heavenly liturgies is not for the sake of persuading his audience to participate in daily or weekly worship. It's there to move the audience to political resistance.

Chapter 5: The Lamb—[1] Then I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one seated on the throne. It had writing on the front and the back, and it was sealed with seven seals. [2] I saw a powerful angel, who proclaimed in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” [3] But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or look inside it. [4] So I began to weep and weep, because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look inside it. [5] Then one of the elders said to me, “Don’t weep. Look! The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has emerged victorious so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

[6] Then, in between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb, standing as if it had been slain. It had seven horns and seven eyes, which are God’s seven spirits, sent out into the whole earth. [7] He came forward and took the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne. [8] When he took the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each held a harp and gold bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. [9] They took up a new song, saying, “You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, because you were slain, and by your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe, language, people, and nation. [10] You made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will rule on earth.”

NOTES: Two words "lion" and "victorious" ("has conquered", NRSV) lead us to expect a fierce animal to open the scroll. Yet John delivers an amazing surprise. In place of the expected lion comes a lamb (Gk *arnion*) which is the diminutive form of the word, implying vulnerability. This is not only the central symbol of Jesus for the book of Revelation. It is also central to our understanding of him in Christian tradition as well.

Scene 3—The Seal and Trumpet Plague Cycles, Ch 6-11

The Seven Seals—Ch 6-7

Chapter 6: Seals One Through Six—[1] Then I looked on as the Lamb opened **one** of the seven seals...[2] So I looked, and there was a white horse. Its rider held a bow and was given a crown. And he went forth from victory to victory.

[3] When the Lamb opened the **second seal**...[4] Out came another horse, fiery red. Its rider was allowed to take peace from the earth so that people would kill each other. He was given a large sword.

[5] When he opened the **third seal**...So I looked, and there was a black horse. Its rider held a balance for weighing in his hand. [6] I heard what sounded like a voice from among the four living creatures. It said, "A quart of wheat for a denarion, and three quarts of barley for a denarion, but don't damage the olive oil and the wine."

[7] When he opened the **fourth seal**...[8] So I looked, and there was a pale green horse. Its rider's name was Death, and the Grave was following right behind. They were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill by sword, famine, disease, and the wild animals of the earth.

[9] When he opened the **fifth seal**, I saw under the altar those who had been slaughtered on account of the word of God and the witness they had given. [10] They cried out with a loud voice, "Holy and true Master, how long will you wait before you pass judgment? How long before you require justice for our blood, which was shed by those who live on earth?" [11] Each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to rest a little longer, until their fellow servants and brothers and sisters—who were about to be killed as they were—were finished.

QUESTION: How does this make you feel? Don't get bogged down in the details!

NOTES: The opening of the seals gives us scenes of destruction rampaging across the world. Like an urgent walk-up call, the first four seal visions deliver God's exposé of the evils of the Roman imperial system. John sees vivid pictures of war, famine, and the pathologies of the empire, drawing his imagery from Zechariah 1:7-11; 6:1-8. The fifth seal shifts the focus to those who were martyred for their faith in Jesus. The sixth seal has the entire cosmos in upheaval.

According to most contemporary scholars the seals [*Ch 6-7*], trumpets [*Ch 8-9*], and bowls [*Ch 16*] all function as warnings with the aim of strengthening an ethic or resistance on the part of the audience. The warnings intensify with each sequence. The trumpets and bowls are modeled after the Exodus plagues of the Hebrew Scriptures, whereas the seals sequence does not follow one specific biblical pattern.

The violence of the seals sequence poses troubling ethical questions for contemporary interpreters. Most scholars argue that the violence of the seals represents Rome's own violence, not God's violence. John is not glorifying war, but rather unmasking structural violence and the consequences of militarism. Liberation scholars read Revelation's seals as as proclaiming a judgment against the empires and a vision of justice for all victims. God's assurance that it will be just a little while before oppression ends has brought hope to marginalized peoples throughout history.

Chapter 7: (Interlude) Triumph of the Faithful— [4] Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed from every tribe of the Israelites... (Revelation lists the names here. Lots of 12,000's which, of course, is a significant biblical number.)

[9] After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands. [10] They cried out with a loud voice: "Victory belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

[11] All the angels stood in a circle around the throne, and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell facedown before the throne and worshipped God, [12] saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and always. Amen."

[13] Then one of the elders said to me, "Who are these people wearing white robes, and where did they come from?" [14] I said to him, "Sir, you know." Then he said to me, "These people have come out of great hardship. They have washed their robes and made them white in the Lamb's blood. [15] This is the reason they are before God's throne. They worship him day and night in his temple, and the one seated on the throne will shelter them. [16] They won't hunger or thirst anymore. No sun or scorching heat will beat down on them, [17] because the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them. He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Chapter 8: Seal Seven—[1] Then, when the Lamb opened the **seventh seal**, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

NOTES: Even in the most difficult sections of Revelation, judgment is not unrelenting. A similar interlude will interrupt the trumpet sequence. These interludes employ the ancient rhetorical model of a "digression," presenting material that is set apart from—and even sometimes more urgent than—the body of the narrative. Revelation's interludes function rhetorically to shape the identity of God's people as protected, separated, praising, persecuted, and vindicated, preparing the community to persevere in its prophetic witness even in the midst of hardship.

The "sealing" that marks God's people on their foreheads is the same word used to identify the seven seals on the scroll in chapter 6. Sealing may be baptismal imagery [2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13, 4:30], though there is no actual mention of baptism in Revelation. "Sealing" recalls Ezekiel's description of the mark on the forehead that saved the remnant from judgment [Ezek 9:4] as well as the Passover story in Exodus, when the angel seals the Israelites' doorposts with the blood of the Passover lamb so their children will be spared [Exodus 12].

The white-robed multitudes sing songs and wave palm branches. "Salvation," "blessing," "glory," and "power" were imperial terms common in Roman propaganda,

used in the songs here to make to make counter-imperial claims for God alone. Palm branches in the hands of these worshippers allude to the Feast of Tabernacles [Sukkot], one of Revelations many Exodus links [Lev 23:40-43]. For Revelation, a dramatic new Exodus is being undertaken not in Egypt but in the heart of the Roman Empire.

"Who is able to stand?" was the ominous question at the end of the dreaded sixth seal. The interlude of Revelation 7 gives God's people their answer to that question by depicting their identity as a redeemed community. By the end of Revelation 7, God's people can confidently answer: "With God's help, we are those who are able to stand."

The Seven Plagues—Ch 8-11

Chapter 8-9: Trumpet Plagues One Through Six— [2] Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. [3] Another angel came and stood at the altar, and he held a gold bowl for burning incense. He was given a large amount of incense, in order to offer it on behalf of the prayers of all the saints on the gold altar in front of the throne. [4] The smoke of the incense offered for the prayers of the saints rose up before God from the angel's hand. [5] Then the angel took the incense container and filled it with fire from the altar. He threw it down to the earth, and there were thunder, voices, lightning, and an earthquake. [6] Then the seven angels who held the seven trumpets got ready to blow them. [7] The **first angel blew his trumpet**, and hail and fire mixed with blood appeared, and was thrown down to the earth. A third of the earth was burned up. A third of the trees were burned up. All the green grass was burned up.

NOTES: The seven trumpets follow a pattern similar to that of the seven seals: the first four elements form a quartet, followed by the fifth and sixth element intensifying the destruction, and then an interlude of hope [Ch 10-11] before the seventh element. John models the trumpets of Revelation on trumpet passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. In Ezekiel 33, the the prophet blows the trumpet to warn people so that the wicked "turn from their ways and live." Trumpets can also function militarily [Josh 6, 2 Chr 13:12], as priestly announcements of festivals [Num 10:1-10], or eschatologically to announce the Day of the Lord [Joel 2:1, Zeph 1:26].

The calamities announced by trumpet borrow their imagery primarily from the Exodus plagues. Together, the trumpet and bowl sequences function to evoke a sense of a new exodus for God's people, this time from the Roman empire. Like the plague sequence in Exodus, the judgments announced by the trumpets elicit both hope and terror—enacting a cosmic judgment that brings justice and liberation.

Chapters 10-11: (Interlude) John's Call Renewed & The Two Witnesses

NOTES: This interlude's many images can be confusing, combining descriptions from the book of Daniel and other prophetic texts. It consists of two parts: the renewal of John's call to prophesy [Ch 10], and the story of the two witnesses [Ch 11]. The overall goal is to encourage prophetic witness. John's hearers are not just passive spectators in the cosmic drama.

Chapter 10: John's Call Renewed—[5] Then the angel I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. [6] He swore by the one who lives forever and always, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, and said, "The time is up. [7] In the days when the seventh angel blows his trumpet, God's mysterious purpose will be accomplished, fulfilling the good news he gave to his servants the prophets."

[8] Then the voice I heard from heaven spoke to me again and said, "Go, take the opened scroll from the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the land." [9] So I went to the angel and told him to give me the scroll. He said to me, "Take it and eat it. It will make you sick to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth." [10] So I took the scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. And it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I swallowed it, it made my stomach churn. [11] I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings."

Chapter 11: John's Call Renewed (continued)—[1] Then I was given a measuring rod, which was like a pole. And I was told, "Get up and measure God's temple, the altar, and those who worship there. [2] But don't measure the court outside the temple. Leave that out, because it has been given to the nations, and they will trample the holy city underfoot for forty-two months."

NOTES: The renewal of John's prophetic call is symbolized in three actions: swallowing, prophesying, and measuring. By swallowing the scroll, John internalizes its message into his own life, in the tradition of Ezekiel [Ezek 2:8—3:3]. Measuring the temple, a symbolic action, also recalled Ezekiel [Ezek 40:3]. Since the physical temple in Jerusalem had long since been destroyed by the Romans, "temple" and "holy city" probably refer to John's own community. The number 42 is also significant. 6 (that which falls short of perfection) X 7 (perfection, holy) = 42. John is telling us that a clash between these two powers is inevitable.

Chapter 11: Two Witnesses—[3] I will allow my two witnesses to prophesy for 1,260 days, wearing mourning clothes. [4] These are the two olive trees and the two lamp stands that stand before the Lord of the earth. [7] When they have finished their witnessing, the beast that comes up from the abyss will make war on them, gain victory over them, and kill them. [8] Their dead bodies will lie on the street of the great city that is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. [11] But after three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet. Great fear came over those who saw them...[13] At that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. Seven thousand people were killed by the earthquake, and the rest were afraid and gave glory to the God of heaven.

NOTES: The story of the two witnesses serves as a kind of parable. Described as two "lampstands" [the same name given to the churches in 1:20], the two witnesses likely represent the community as it is called to engage in prophetic confrontation with the idolatry of Rome. The symbolic period of time for the two witnesses' prophetic testimony is 1,260 days, i.e. 42 months.

The monstrous beast from the bottomless pit, introduced here for the first time, represents Rome's power to kill. The community's prophetic testimony may lead to martyrdom, as portrayed in the beast killing the two witnesses.

An earthquake, which accompanies the two witnesses' resuscitation, kills one tenth of the population of the great city. The most important detail here is that nine-tenths of the city is saved. Thus the story of the two witnesses assures John's churches that their prophetic testimony will succeed where the trumpets' violent plagues failed.

Chapter 11: Seventh Trumpet Plague—[15] Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ, and he will rule forever and always." [16] Then the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshipped God. [17] They said, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and was, for you have taken your great power and enforced your rule. [18] The nations were enraged, but your wrath came. The time came for the dead to be judged. The time came to reward your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth." [19] Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the chest containing his covenant appeared in his temple. There were lightning, voices, thunder, an earthquake, and large hail.

NOTES: Unlike the first six trumpets that brought disaster, this trumpet brings rejoicing, celebrating the reign of God. The victory song of the elders praises God that the "time" has finally come to "destroy those who destroy the earth," i.e. the Roman imperial system of military conquests and client kings that enslaves lands, and peoples. A theophany in 11:19, with lightning and thunder and a vision of God's temple in heaven, underscores the solemnity of this moment.