

## Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

### *The Revelation to John*

**Readings: Revelation 4:1-8:6**

#### ***Reflections:***

- Majesty and centrality of God – Description of the throne: John was again “in the Spirit” (which means in an intimate time of prayer) when he has this vision. This throne room may be a court room where God is about to enact justice. The images of God’s appearance are similar to his appearance at Sinai when he gave the first covenant to Moses (See Haggai 2). The twenty-four elders are most likely symbolic of the both the old and new covenant (twelve tribes, twelve apostles). These elders seems to play little role in the drama that is to unfold. They may be like a chorus in a Greek drama. The sea of glass is a picture of God’s complete authority. The sea was a source of fear to the ancients and a symbol of something out of control. God is in complete control of the sea in heaven.
- Four living creatures – These represent the gods of the nations in submission to God (see notes on Ezekiel 1 and 10 – August 15,16). Again as God comes to judge Israel with a foreign nation John has a vision declaring that the gods of pagan nations are in submission to the one true God. These four faces of the living creatures as described here reflects the inner faces of the Greek Zodiac and again underscores the authority of God over Rome. The worship from these creatures to God focuses on God’s otherness (holiness), ultimate power, and eternal nature.
- Twenty four elders: We see a complete picture of God’s authority as those symbolic of the nations (the creatures) and those symbolic of God’s covenant people (twenty-four elders) all worship God. The focus of the twenty-four elders is God’s worthiness of all worship and God as the sole creator and sustainer of all creation. This is important because as this drama unfolds we will see God use the evil powers of the nations to bring judgment against apostate Israel and her dead religion.
- Scroll sealed: The scroll represents the revelation of God. Some see it as the document of the New Covenant. The key is to understand that it reveals the truth about God. John weeps because if this scroll is not opened, no one will truly understand God and his nature.
- Scroll take by the Lamb: Jesus is symbolic described according to all of his attributes. He has complete authority (seven horns) and complete wisdom of the Spirit (seven eyes of the seven Spirit). He alone is worthy to open the scroll and reveal the truth about God.

- Elders praise Lamb: The twenty-four elders are portrayed as holding before God the prayers of his people, both from the Old Covenant and from the New Covenant. Throughout the centuries people have been praying and waiting for this day to come. We see again a strong affirmation of Jesus as the sole Lord and Savior of humanity as well as the role God's people play as a set apart nation/kingdom of God populated with people who serve as priests to the rest of the planet. The ultimate destiny of God's people is not to live in heaven but to reign on the earth.
- Angels praise lamb: All praise and honor from all of creation (heaven, earth and below the earth) worships Jesus. This is a new song as Jesus has now through his death and resurrection brought all powers and authorities under himself.
- Destructiveness of sin – first seal: Each seal does not represent a new action but is a description of what will be set in motion once the final seal is broken. The horses represent war being sent against Jerusalem. The rider may symbolize Vespasian or Titus as the Roman General being sent out with the armies or it may be symbolic of Jesus himself leading the charge. It is more likely just a symbol of the foreign powers being sent by Christ with the rider already receiving the victors crown from Christ. A few early texts have "Come and see!" rather than just "Come!" This makes more sense as the listeners are invited to come and see what God is about to do.
- Second seal: Again another symbol of war being released, red is the color of blood and fire. As Josephus described of this war, "...so the daytime was spent shedding blood, and the night in fear." (The Wars of the Jews, 2:18:2). As peace is taken from the land we see the words of Jesus fulfilled (see Luke 19:42-44).
- Third seal: This third horse of war is a symbol of famine. Black would remind the Israelites of Lamentations 5:10 when their skin went black from famine. The scales meant that food had to be carefully portioned. Josephus records that at least one mother ate her dead infant to survive. The oil and the wine most likely refers to the oil and wine in the temple. Even these sacred symbols were confiscated by those struggling to survive. It is a picture of how bad things got because of the famine and lack of food coming into the city.
- Fourth seal: This horse is the symbol of death with the grave or Hades following close behind. The color of the horse is that of a corpse. The description of how death would come ("...sword, famine, and plague and by wild beasts") is an echo of Ezekiel 14:21 and God's judgment against Israel by Babylon in 586 BCE.
- Fifth seal: Below the throne is pictured martyrs crying out for justice. See Luke 18:1-8 for Jesus' teaching on the unjust judge, a close parallel to this image.
- Sixth seal: This is a depiction of the "day of the Lord" (ultimate judgment) and the images reflect the fall of kingdom (see Isaiah 13:10-14; 34:4). Also see Jesus warning of Matthew 24:29-34. These images of natural disasters are symbolic of the governmental structures of the kingdom collapsing. John repeats the sentiment of Malachi 3:2, "Who can endure the day of his coming?"

- Sealing of servants: John uses the image of Ezekiel 9 and the sealing of those who are faithful by God with a seal on their foreheads. The Jews were to tie the Torah to their foreheads as a sign of their covenant. This notion of having a sign of covenant faithfulness was familiar to the Jews. The image here is that messengers are sent to hold back the forces set to destroy Jerusalem until those who have been faithful are sealed and set apart to be saved. This is a reminder that God saves those who are faithful to him (e.g. Noah and his family, Lot and his family, Rahab and her family).
- 144,000 sealed: This is a symbol of the Jewish Christians (Twelve times twelve) who will be rescued from the judgment. They are called the “first fruits” in Revelations 14:4. This is further evidence that John is writing about events in his time. If these rescued people were at the end of time, then they would be called the “last fruits”. James 1:1,18 refers to the Jewish Christians as the “first fruits”.
- Multitude sings praise: John now has a vision of the nations worshipping God. This parallels Acts 2:5 as multitudes praised God at the coming of the Spirit. This is a reminder to the reader that through Christ the nations are welcomed into covenant even as the Old Covenant is being brought to a close as religious, apostate Jerusalem is judged for her rejection of God and his Messiah.
- Angels worship God: All of heaven joins in to worship God.
- Multitude as victims: We see now the identity of the multitude more clearly identified. Some scholars have wondered if these are actual martyrs from the judgment against Jerusalem. This doesn't make sense as the Jewish Christians were saved from the judgment and there were virtually no Gentile Christian martyrs. The term “coming out of the great tribulation” most likely means that these are those that will come into God's salvation because of God bringing the Old Covenant to a close through the tribulation. They are not being rescued out of the judgment but they are the fruit that comes from God disowning his rebellious wife and children and seeking a new family (see Hosea 1:10; 2:23 and Romans 9:24ff and 1 Peter 2:9ff). So these may be martyrs or these may simply be all those who will be saved through Jesus. We must remember that these are visions revealing truth and not strictly chronological events. We can also be encouraged again that all sin is completely dealt with through Jesus' death and that God's heart is for all people everywhere and at all times.
- Seventh seal: It took about a half hour for a priest to offer incense in the temple. The worshippers were to stand in silence as this was offered. The joyful sound of worship is now silenced as the prayers of the saints, particularly the martyrs are offered up to God as a final symbolic act of God hearing his people before acting in response. Then the angel of the Lord takes fire from the altar and hurls it to the earth. This again is symbolic as in the Old Testament cities that were judged by God were to be set fire and burned as an offering to him (see Deuteronomy 13:12-18; Judges 20:40; also see Genesis 19:28). In Ezekiel 10:2 the

same image is used as coals from God's altar are used to burn Jerusalem. Angels with trumpets are now ready to announce the unfolding judgment of God.