

Revelation 6&7 - Unveiling humanity

I really like science fiction books and films and one of the common scenes in a science fiction film is the alien or visitor learning about humanity. Invariably when the alien does this they come across scenes like we just saw. In that scene Lelu who is learning about humanity discovers the horrible truth about humanity and war. In a 2003 NY Times article on war it says that in the past 3400 years there has only been peace for 268 years. And that's only wars which claimed more than 1000 lives, not to mention smaller fights or individual murders. Looking at humanity's existence on this world can be a depressing affair. But what does the Bible say about it, what does the Bible say about all the war, famine, disease? Well here in Revelation we once again see behind the curtain. We get to see John's vision of a heavenly perspective on the tough times in our existence.

Last week we saw the glory of God in heaven where God held a scroll. A scroll which represented God's divine plans, but it was sealed with 7 seals and no one initially was found to be worthy to open it. This was so distressing to John that he started crying as God's good divine plans weren't able to happen. But then the lamb, Jesus, is found to be worthy and here in chapter 6 we see the impact of the lamb opening the seals. The opening of the seals represents God's unfolding will until it is ultimately fulfilled. What does that mean? I think what we see in the seals shows history, now and future until finally the last seal is opened and God's plans are completely fulfilled. So let's go through the seals and see what happens as they are opened.

The first 4 seals release 4 different horsemen. This is one of the most well known images from Revelation, the so called 4 horsemen of the apocalypse. These 4 horsemen represent different disasters types of disaster that will afflict the world through history. For each of them we will look at what the symbolism means - what it would have meant to the people who heard it in the 1st Century and what it means to us.

The first is a white horse and we are told he rides out as a conqueror. This represents war and invasion from without. The description of the rider with a white horse and bow resembles the Parthians, one of the only military force in the ancient world feared by the Romans since they had defeated a Roman army twice. Conquest would represent people dying in battle, loved ones leaving to go fight a war. This horse represents the loss of lives and destruction as your homeland is conquered. The image of a rider bringing war would have been a worrying and scary thought. For us too it isn't hard to be scared of War. Although we don't have wars here in Australia, we see it all the time on the news, some of our homelands are engaged currently in war, we may know friends or loved ones who help defend us by serving in the armed forces. We too understand the worry and fear that war creates.

Following the white horse comes a red horse. This one represents bloodshed and probably internal strife. Civil war, as men slay each other. Again for the people of the time they would know the pain and suffering that comes from internal conflict. In 68-69 there were 4 different Roman emperors in a year. Israel had itself instigated several uprisings against Rome. And each of these conflicts also brought death and destruction. It pitted men against men. And again on the news we too see civil war and turmoil around the globe. We even have our own uprisings here in Australia, You can think of Cronulla riots as just a small taste of it.

The third horse is a black horse representing scarcity or famine. The prices of the food listed are famine prices as they are up to 12x higher than normal. The prices represent a day's wages only giving enough to feed one person. Again this would have resonated with the hearers. There were lots of famines in the Roman Empire - times when food became scarce and people died from starvation. We see this in today's world as well, Worldhunger.org says that around 795million people today are suffering from chronic undernourishment. That is more than 10% of the worlds population! And it's not just overseas. Here in Australia over 100,000 people are homeless.

And the final horse is a pale horse representing plague and death. Again hearers would have known of incurable diseases which could kill. One study suggests that in ancient times from July to October each year almost 30,000 people would die from various infectious diseases. Today despite improvements in medicine we haven't escaped this horror either. In 2014 36.9 million people were living with HIV and it resulted in 1.2 million deaths. Even here in Western society we face cancer and heart disease. We too know the horrible affects of disease and death.

It's a bleak picture isn't it. It's not a pleasant list of things to go through these 4 seals. They represent a lot of the suffering that we face on earth in our existence. What we are reading in these first four seals represents history and the future. It represents human existence.

So what do we learn from these first four seals. What do we learn from all this death and destruction?

Well, there is one very important part that I've left out as we've gone through these descriptions. And that is that God is in control over everything. These are not uncontrollable events beyond God's power, it's part of God's plan. Let's look again at the first four seals, do you see the line that is repeated at the beginning of each seal. The Lamb opened the seal.. These disasters are part of Jesus opening of the seals. God is still in control. And more than that, there is another phrase that is repeated, have a look in verse 2, the white horse was given a crown, in verse 4 the red horse is given power, in verse 8 they are all given power. These four horrible horseman don't have the power themselves, it is given to them by God. And we can see that while the power is given, there are restrictions placed on the horsemen. In the third seal, they are told not to damage the oil and wine, and in verse 8, they are only given power over the fourth of the earth. The quarter is not a geographical fourth or a numerical fourth, but it represents a limitation, they are only given limited power. So we learn that even though there is terrible destruction, famine and death, God is in control over it all. Knowing this I think can give us great comfort.

You might still be wondering, if God is in control, why does Jesus let the four horseman out at all? Why is there the need for these destructive horses? I think the war, the famine, the plague, are a taste of what will come on the final judgement day. I think it's one of God's ways of warning us of the horribleness that people will face on that last day. As we see the suffering that has occurred throughout history and that we may personally experience now, we get a small taste of judgment that humanity will face on that last day. If what we have seen throughout history is when God has held back, imagine what the last day will look like. A truly horrendous time for humanity.

And now we come to the fifth seal. The scene of the first four has been earth, and now we move to heaven. As the first four seals had described all of humanity's existence, we now see unveiled an extra dimension for Christians. You see while Christians suffer and die like everyone else under war, famine, and plague, Christians also face martyrdom, Christians also suffer for being Christian, for following Jesus, and we see that here in verse 9. These people have died because of the word of God and the testimony of the word they had maintained. This would have resonated with the listeners, they likely would have gone through persecution already, whether it be from the growing resistance of the Jews themselves, or the persecution from Rome. From the very early church, Christians were dying for their faith. And the natural response for Christians would be, How long, God? And at first, their question of judgement and avenging may seem a bit harsh, in contrast to what we see with Jesus on the cross, who prays Father forgive them, or of Stephen the first Christian martyr who said do not hold this sin against them. But that's not the only response we see in the Bible towards persecution. Many of the psalms call for God's justice to be shown against wrongdoing, and that's what it is really talking about here - Justice. These martyrs want God to judge the earth and everyone in it, to justify their death. We see their justification in part as they are given white robes. White robes signifying purity, they have been washed clean, and because they maintained their testimony they have been justified. They are also told, to wait a little longer until the full number of their fellow servants were killed. This too is showing God's sovereign power. This shows that there is a limit to the number of Christians who will die because they follow Jesus, that there is an end in sight, there is a number at which Christian deaths will stop.

God's final response to the Martyrs question of how long is the opening of the sixth seal. This seal represents the start of the end of the earth.

Here we see the horrific imagery of a giant earthquake, the sun turning black, the moon turning red, stars falling from the sky, and the sky itself peeling back like a scroll being rolled up, truly terrifying imagery. This kind of imagery is used in the old testament, and even by Jesus, to describe what happens just before the day of the Lord, the day of judgement. I know sometimes when I read things like this in the Bible, my brain switches into science mode. I think of my astronomy and think there's no way that stars can fall from the sky, they are too big, and how can the sky recede like a scroll? But if we think this way, we are missing the point, as Robert Mounce a Revelation commentator said about the four horsemen and I think it applies here too, "Instead of discussing the probable significance of each of the four coloured horses those first listeners would undoubtedly have recoiled in terror as war, bloodshed, famine, and death galloped furiously across the stage of their imagination. Visions at best are to be experienced rather than analyzed. Those who approach Revelation with a sympathetic imagination are most apt to understand its true meaning."

If we think about this description in verse 12-14 in that way, it becomes truly terrifying to think what John must have seen. That's why the people react the way they do in verse 15 and 16, they hide in caves and say fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come and who can withstand it?

Justice has come, and unlike times in today's world where the rich or powerful can buy their way out, or where the poor can sometimes be overlooked, here your wealth or power plays no part on whether or not you will face justice. And you see whose wrath they are facing? It is the wrath of the Lamb!!! This is something else which I think the world and sometimes even Christians forget about

Jesus. Yes Jesus shows us love, yes he is meek and mild, yes he is a servant, but just as much as Ben showed us Jesus is these things and our salvation, Jesus is also judgement and wrath as well. Part of what Jesus will do is judge everyone on the last day and bring his wrath against those not found worthy. So then the question is who can withstand it. If money or power has no bearing on the judgement who then can stand?

We see the answer in chapter 7. I think the first part of chapter 7 is actually similar to the first part of chapter 6, instead of the four horsemen, we have the four winds and they are bringing destruction, but again, God is limiting their destruction. God is not letting complete destruction happen until he has put a seal on all foreheads of the servants of God. We then see two descriptions of the people with a seal on their foreheads. The first in verse 4-8, and the second in verse 9. I think these were two different ways of describing the same people. In verse 4-8 John hears the people are numbered as 144,000 and like most numbers in Revelation, this is a symbolic number, it represents $12 \times 12 \times 1000$, 12 being a number representing God's people, there were 12 tribes of Israel, and 12 disciples. And 1000 simply represents a lot, so 144000 means the complete number of God's people who will be numerous. It is interesting to note, that it's not just a number that is given, verse 5-8 goes on to describe the numbers in more detail. They are described 12000 at a time by tribe, why would this be? There are a number of possible answers, but I think it is reminiscent of the counts that were done for armies in Old Testament times, these people of God were being listed up like an army.

The second description that John views God's people is in verse 9-17. Previously John heard the number of those sealed, he now looks and sees them. And if you want more proof that the 144000 number is symbolic you hear John say that it is so great a number that no can count.

And they are all standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They are wearing white robes, showing they are purified, washed clean, and they praise God. And in what must have been a spectacular vision, God's people, with God's angels, the elders and the living creatures, all join together in worship of God.

And how do you get to be a part of this wonderful celebration? How can you make sure that you have the seal of the living God and not hiding under rocks? We see the answer in verse 14, these are they who have come out of the great tribulation, they have washed their robes, made them white in the blood of the Lamb, to be part of this great salvation, it's not about power, it's not about money, it's not about doing good and living a good life, it's about accepting that Jesus died on the cross, that his death paid for our sins, that his blood has washed white our dirtiness, our sinfulness. Its about us standing firm in Jesus as we face the troubles of the four horsemen, as we face the troubles of martyrdom and the troubles of this life, its about us enduring this suffering and maintaining our testimony of what Jesus has done for us. That is how we can be a part of this great celebration, and it's the only way.

And the reward is amazing,

Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; 'he will lead them to springs of living water.' 'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

On the train home from work just this last week, I saw two Mormons and it reminded me of their zeal and passion. They clearly have a passion to get their message out into the world. I think it's sad that sometimes we as Christians are complacent and only satisfied with our own conversion and personal growth and we lack the zeal or passion that other groups have about what they believe in. Sometimes we have more zeal and passion for our favourite sports team, or our favourite musician or the best recipe we saw on Pinterest, or our favourite game. Shouldn't we have more zeal and passion for the greatest message of the whole world? The good news of the bible is that all of humanity, because of our rebellion against God are facing his terrible wrath and judgement, no one can escape it, and the message is that you can escape God's judgement, and it's by accepting Jesus as your King, the one who paid your punishment, the one who washes you clean. Isn't this the best message you can share? Do we have zeal and passion when it comes to sharing God's message?

We as Christians should be motivated and passionate enough to share the message of salvation, to share the answer to Who can stand?

As we read that start of the final judgement where people would rather be crushed to death rather than face God's wrath, surely

One of the key themes of the book of Revelation is perseverance. The Christians that John was writing to were no doubt experiencing suffering, suffering for being a Christian, and Revelation was there to tell them that God was in control. Despite suffering from mankind, from nature, from persecution, God is still in control, and ultimately their perseverance will result in God's justice being revealed. They will be glorified, they will be made holy, made white, and those that persecute them if they do not repent will suffer on the last day under Jesus wrath.

These chapters in Revelation can be a big wakeup call.

For some people here, you may know that you haven't accepted Jesus as your saviour, if that is the case I urge you to speak to the person who brought you, or our ministry staff Emily, Nick or Marty, talk to me. We will be more than happy to share what Jesus has done for us and share how you too can be sealed with God.

For others I think the four horseman and the sixth judgement day seal is the challenge we need. For some Christians, and I include myself in this at times, we may too easily identify with the second half of chapter 7, we may feel a little too comfortable we may not feel the threat that the four horseman represent. We may be fortunate enough to avoid most wars and conflict, we avoid most famine and plague and because of that we may not understand the true impact of what is to come. We need to be challenged to realise the terror of the end times, when seal 6 opened. Reading the chapters here in Revelation should remind us of the wrath that is to come. We shouldn't be comfortable, we should be pushing to reach those that haven't heard.

Finally others may know all too well the terror of the four horseman. For them this can be great comfort. I know for me as I've lived my life there are many things I struggle with. Whether it be the horrible things I see on the television in terms of war, famine, plague, whether it be the horrible destruction I see from nature as earthquakes hit, or whether sickness and death surrounds us, whether it is the suffering of Christians I see who are martyred every day for their belief, or whether it is more close to home as I struggle with work, or just simply even living. I think here in chapter 6

and 7 we can receive comfort knowing that God is in control of all of this, that suffering will happen for a limited amount of time, that there will be an end to suffering, and those who do evil will be judged, that I will be clean and as I stand firm there will be a day where for Christians, all suffering will end I think that helps give us perseverance in the here and now. This message is a comfort to myself as a Christian but also a challenge for me to share God's message of salvation with others – for without Christ and the washing by His blood humanity's end is the destruction John describes in Revelation. ***So are we ready, with the best message in the whole world, are we ready to go out to every tribe, nation and language so that we can stand together at the last day praising and worshiping God saying Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb***".