

Getting started:

John is writing to suffering churches. And their suffering is grounded in their allegiance to Jesus. This allegiance draws a very distinct line between their faith in God and the pagan world they inhabit. Remember, the seven churches have been called to life in, and exclusive service to, him. But what of the evil they see around them. How are they deal with the persecution and mocking they face because of their belief? How does suffering for their faith make any kind of sense? Eugene Peterson observes, “Twenty percent of Revelation is written before he (John) turns to the question of evil in history – the pain and wickedness that are everywhere and so distressingly evident politically, socially, and personally.” The issue of pain and wickedness are critical, but there are other matters foundational to how the churches will confront pain and wickedness that must be first addressed.

Peterson’s observation is a good way to view the structure of the early part of Revelation. By the end of chapter 5 the churches need clarity on several things. Peterson’s 3 summary statements help us see this in wide vision.

1. **Ch 1** - The magnificent ruling Christ towers over everything.
2. **Ch 2&3** - Christ not only towers over, but is among them and sees (*I know*) into the detailed conditions of each faith community and is conversant with their virtues and failures, and cares for them.
3. **Ch 4&5** - Through worship there’s an immersion in the centering reality of God’s rule and redemption. Christ is the person in whom God’s will is victoriously accomplished.

Why do the churches need this kind of preparation? Because as ch 6 & 7 now take center stage, evil is confronted head on. The questions here are, what to make of all the evil around us? Is faithfulness to Jesus for nought? Are we just lambs thrown the lions for the sake of sport? What are we missing? Peterson puts it this way,

“The puzzling ascendancy of evil must have occupied many Christian’s minds at the time of St. John’s exile. If the kingdom of God has been inaugurated by Christ, why are Roman armies so much in evidence? The gospel declared of God’s love for the world; Roman decrees put the people who believed it in prisons and on crosses. Christ lived, suffered, died, and rose again-and the world was getting worse not better.”

Perhaps you’ve wondered the same thing. Ch 6&7 remind us that Christians aren’t merely lambs thrown to the lions. Their suffering is working toward an end. They’re not helpless hapless victims of the atrocities committed against them. These chapters bring into sharp relief the significance of the scroll, evil, and the supremacy of God. Further, we’re made aware of the fact that the church is protected. While horrific evil seems unending, there’s one who watches over everything. What seems out of control and meaningless from an earthly point of view takes on new shape and color when viewed from God’s vantage point.

In the midst of suffering the evil one often whispers in our ear, “See, God has abandoned you. He’s not faithful, nor is he as powerful as he says he is in your Bible.” When this voice rises, we may be tempted to agree because nothing changes, and it only gets worse. I can well imagine that this is **possibly how the disciples might have felt when they followed Jesus to the cross.**

The value of Ch. 6&7 is that they come against the evil one’s lie. God hasn’t abandoned his people. As the scroll’s seals open we’re made aware of God’s hand in action. History and faith don’t run on separate tracks. To those who endure the present evil, faith and history seem to lack connection, but here they’re very connected. And in this, the church is to find comfort and strength to continue its life and exclusive calling and allegiance.

The core:

Note on structure: The actual vision of the seals being opened runs from 6:1 right through to 8:1. Ch 6 (seals 1-6) reveals a very destructive sequence while ch 7 reveals a picture of consolation and comfort. Ch 7 seems to function like an interlude or parenthesis between seal 6 (6:12-17) and seal 7 (8:1).

The centrality of the slain Lamb:

In our last session the observation was made that when comparing Jesus in the two visions of him (1:12-16 – the ancient of days vs 5:6-7 – the slain lamb), the slain lamb seems a very weak image when viewed against the powerful image of the ancient of days.

Ironically the slain lamb is the only one found worthy to open the seals of the scroll (book). Ironic as well is the fact that the lamb appears to be slain but is actually standing (the resurrection).

The slain lamb standing is God’s way of communicating that what may appear as meek and mild is in reality the power, glory, and victory of the lamb.

Think about what Paul said,

God has chosen the foolish things of world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the strong things which are strong. In the end both images are very powerful in their own way. (1 Cor 1:27-31)

The centrality of the throne and worship:

Whatever occurs in Ch.’s 6 & 7 is not random. Whatever occurs does so because God is on his throne, and the lamb who receives worship in concert with God, deems it to happen. God is in absolute authority. Additionally, whatever occurs, does so in the context of worship. As Warren Wiersbe points out, this context may seem odd to us. How do worship and judgement go together? He notes that this is because we do not understand either the holiness of God or the sinfulness of man.

Time-frame – Past, present, or future:

When do the events of Rev. 6 & 7 happen? This is a question hotly debated among Christians. Many are convinced that the events of these two chapters occur at some future point. Others are convinced that they were fulfilled near the time of John's writing. Usually Christians argue about this with each other accusing each other of some kind of misinterpretation and they finally separate and cut off fellowship with each other. When this occurs the only winner is the evil one. Obviously there will come a future day when God ultimately judges evil once for all. And that date is unknown to us. While Rev. 6 & 7 look forward to an ultimate day when evil will be smashed, there are vestiges of these two chapters happening throughout the generations as we await that final day.

The question to answer:

How does John's vision here speak to God's people in AD 95? The 7 churches of AD. 95 are the primary audience of John's writing. For us to simply write off the opening of the seals, indeed also the trumpets and bowls, as irrelevant to the church is in my estimation a grave error. If the reader of the Revelation is to be blessed by reading, hearing and heeding this book, what blessing could be gained if the lion's share it is irrelevant? Again, I like Warren Wiersbe's thought. John isn't just writing prophetically about a future date, he's also writing great theology. It's this theology that God's people, regardless of the time in history, need to grasp and integrate into their thinking and living.

Seals 1-4 (6:1-8). Unlike the seven days of creation in Genesis, here John shows us six seals of destruction and one seal of rest. It's almost as if God is now taking apart or reversing what he originally put together. It's important to observe right at the start that the Lamb breaks the seals and the four creatures issue the commands. Seals 1 to 4 identify four horsemen who enter the world stage at the behest of those around the throne to "come". What John wants us to see is heaven exerting itself on the earth in a judgement that is thorough, unrelenting, and yet with a sound measure of control.

It's obvious that the 4 horsemen symbolize destruction unleashed. These horsemen aren't literal, they're symbolic of conquering, hostility, famine, and death that come in succession and envelope all living people. Here, we see the advantage of the vivid kind of writing John used (**picture = 1000 words**). The apocalyptic/prophetic style makes generous use of pictures so the message burns deep into the soul. The images are graphic and violent. One thing to note is that no precise timeframe is given as to when these things occur. Perhaps we shouldn't get too stuck on trying to figure this out. The slain Lamb standing between the throne and the elders indicates that what happens here does so in the realm of the post-ascension Jesus. Beyond this, the overall sweep of history is not as clear as we would like it to be. Perhaps John's emphasis isn't on when this occurs, but that it occurs.

Seal 5 (6:9-11) is interesting because it focuses not on the world of destruction but on the ones who faced death because of Jesus. "Underneath the altar" is important because it reminds us that those who've lost their lives because of Jesus aren't lost, they're kept in a particular place in the heavenly throne room. But the question they pose to the LORD is

intriguing **(6:10)**. We also ask it because evil seems to continue without accountability. The response of heaven is surprising **(6:11)**. They are given white robes and told to rest until the number of their brethren who would also been slain as they were, was complete. **How does this answer make you feel? What seems to be implied here is that God's people aren't exempt from the troubles unleashed by the seals being opened. Your response?**

Seal 6 (6:12-17). The earth now comes apart by an earthquake. By the end of seal 6 we come face to face with the truth of Psalm 24:1, 2, **"The earth is the LORD'S, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it. For he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers."** What is key here is not simply the fact that the earth comes apart, but the reaction of the kings, great men, commanders, the rich, the strong, the slaves and freemen (6:15) must be observed.

They ask the mountains and rocks to fall on them in an effort to hide from God. Not only is creation reversing, but the attitudes of those who dwell on the earth are reversing as well. From Genesis 3 onward people live with the temptation that they didn't need God because, in eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would be like God. History is replete with examples of those who ruled the earth like they were God. Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar quickly come to mind. Both, however, were reminded in powerful ways that they weren't who they thought they were. Seal 6 points out to God's people that those who persecuted them and treaded on them in hurtful ways would eventually hide from God.

The last question asked in 6:17, "who is able to stand?" is important. It becomes the point ch 7 answers, "God's people will stand." Rev 6 & 7 illustrates in important ways, **Psalm 1**.

The one who delights in the LORD will stand in the assembly of the righteous where the wicked will not (Psalm 1:4-6).

Ch7:1-3. While seals have been opened there is a curious contrast here-something is being sealed – people, God's people. Seals 1-6 have been opened and unrelenting terror has rained on the earth. In ch 7 some people are being sealed and protected – God's people. A seal of this kind implies ownership. These people are clearly marked in a particular way so as to identify them. They belong to God.

Ch 7:4-17. But who specifically are these people? Biblical scholars debate this question long and hard with opinions ranging widely. The two most common approaches suggest that these verses either represent literal Israel in V.4-8, and the Gentiles in V.9-17, or that this is a picture of the whole church from two different points of view.

From John's use of language from the beginning this could quite possibly describe God's people and so it's quite legitimate to think of V.4-8 as describing the whole church. And the churches of Revelation would have been mixed congregations containing both Jew and Gentile. Added to this the number 144,000 is significant because it is the number 12

squared and then multiplied by 1,000. Among the symbolic numbers of Revelation 7 and 12 are significant. They both describe something that is complete, seven days of creation, and 12 tribes of Israel. Is V.4-8 describing the church as God sees it from eternity past? One people from many tribes?

Rather than spending our time debating exactly who these people are, we need to spend our time seeing what God wants us to see. As Dr. Ed Neufeld points out, the primary point John is making here is the success of the sealing in light of the trouble encountered through the opening of seals 1-6.

Obviously the church is made up of all those who claim Christ whether Jew or Gentile. And here in 7:9-19 we see the church not only held together by God's sealing, but their victory through Christ. In the final analysis this is what the church needs to know. Evil will not prevail, the faithful in Christ will rise above those who now tread on them. In the end, the very things that distress them now will disappear to be replaced by eternal joy (7:17).

Seal 7 (8:1). Silence now dominates the scene. What is the purpose of the silence? We're not told. I rather wonder if the silence is not there to aid in our reflection. It could also signal the end of judgement, sort of like the seventh day rest of Gen 2:1-3. Yet another option is that with the beginning of the trumpet judgements, the silence may be there so that the prayers of the saints can now be added (Barclay). Remember 5:8 which features bowls of incense which are the prayers of the saints? All of this takes place in the throne room in heaven. Now in 8:3 the prayers of the saints are gathered and mixed with fire from the altar and hurled at the earth. Barclay and others suggest that the silence gives room for the voices of the saints to be heard.

Making it Real:

It's easy to get lost in detail of Ch. 6 & 7 and miss the larger message. Don't misunderstand, details matter, but make sure the larger picture remains in focus. Answer the following questions to think through what we're just seen in these chapters.

What are the seven churches to gain from this vision with, especially in light of the conditions that Jesus reveals to them in his evaluation of them? To the courageous churches? To the compromising churches? To the caving-in churches?

How do the details help to develop the overall vision?

What does ch 6 & 7 contribute to our understanding of the relationship between faith and history?

What does ch 6 & 7 contribute to our personal understanding of God's place in our life when we face trouble?

**Is the picture of Ch 6 & 7 paints one that we are also meant to carry with us day to day?
How so?**

The bottom line of Ch. 6 & 7, I think, is that the churches in AD. 95 can have great confidence in God's ability to deal with evil. They may not see the great reversal of history and their vindication in their day, but they can be confident that God will address it decisively and finally and they will, in the end, be victorious.

This may help us to understand the vital role that faith plays in our day to day life. Faith needs to be robust and mature. As such having to face hardship is God's way of helping us dig our faith deep into his revealed truth and growing in it.

Think of Ch. 6 & 7 this way. Just like the churches of AD. 95, we have also believed God's promise (Jn. 14:1-6, 1 Pet. 1:1-9; 4:12-19) of one yet future day being brought into his glorious presence and to be with Jesus forever in eternity.

When will this happen? We don't know. But as we wait we must live by faith looking forward to what God has promised he will do. However, in the face of constant worldly pressure it's not hard for our faith to lag. This is where being part of a committed Christian fellowship is so important. This is why the writer to the Hebrews said, (Heb. 10:19-25)

Therefore, brothers *and sisters*, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, *through* His flesh, and since *we have* a great priest over the house of God, let's approach *God* with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let's hold firmly to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let's consider how to encourage one another in love and good deeds, not abandoning our own meeting together, as is the habit of some people, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Is your faith lagging today? Rev. 6 & 7 can speak blessing into your life as you trust God's ability and timing to settle all accounts and vindicate you as a follower of Jesus who is alive forever more.