Seven Seals - Revelation 6-7

Series: The Lamb Wins - Revelation
Date: 25 October 2026, 20th Sunday after Trinity
Location: St George's Battery Point
Texts: Revelation 6.1-8.5

Neil the Seal - 7 seals

One of the delightful things about living in southern Tassie at the moment is our favourite neighbour, Neil the Seal. We're continuing our series in the book of Revelation and today we're looking at the 7 seals in Revelation chapters 6 and 7. These are not aquatic mammals but wax blobs that you drip onto a scroll or letter and then imprint with a signet ring. (Ok, it's a lame pun, but it's hard work coming up with opening illustrations!) Last week we saw in John's vision that the one on the throne of heaven had a scroll with 7 seals and that only the slain Lamb, Jesus, was worthy to open the scroll. The scroll represents the message of the Old Testament prophets about the coming kingdom of God that John sees began in Jesus' first coming and that will be completed when he returns. So the scroll represents world history between Jesus' first and second coming.

Remember, Revelation uses highly symbolic language to give a heavenly perspective on earthly realities. John uses vivid word pictures drawn from the whole of the rest of the Bible. We're going to have a go at understanding the pictures in these chapters, and what they mean. And we'll see that these chapters present a sober picture of the world between Jesus' first and second coming, but also a wonderful promise and hope for all who trust in Christ. Let's dive in.

The 4 Horsemen - (Seals 1-4) - 6.1-8

Chapter 6 opens with the Lamb opening the first 4 seals of the scroll. With each seal comes a rider on a horse. These are the famous four horsemen of the apocalypse. We think of the apocalypse as a world ending cataclysm, think your classic disaster film with a giant asteroid hitting earth. But remember the word "apocalypse" is simply the Greek word for revelation, or unveiling. These 4 horsemen first appear in the book of Zechariah. They are given power by God to execute 4 judgements. This symbolises God's ultimate control over these evil forces, even death itself, even when it looks like Satan is winning in history.

The first horse is white and symbolises wars of conquest. The second horse is red and symbolises war, possibly civil wars. The black horse symbolises famine. Its rider holds scales weighing out rations. But he is forbidden to damage the more luxury goods of oil and wine.

This symbolises the reality that famine always affects the poor more than the rich. The final horse is pale. "Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him."

The judgements get repeated in verse 8:

> They were given power over a quarter of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

This pattern of judgement is repeated again and again in the Old Testament as God's judgment in history on the disobedient. So for example, Ezekiel 6.11: "Cry our "Alas!" because of all the wicked and detestable practices of the people of Israel, for they will fall by the sword, famine and plague."

The fact that the horsemen only were given power of a quarter of the earth shows that not everyone is affected by the horsemen, even though the number 4 suggests that their destructive forces are worldwide. And this suggests that the four horsemen do not symbolise the final judgement, but more the evils that come in the normal course of human history. We recall Jesus' own words,

> You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. [7] Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. [8] All these are the beginning of birth-pains.[1]

Jesus goes on to say, "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and be put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me."[2] And this is what John sees with the opening of the 5th seal.

The Prayers of the Martyrs - (Seal 5) - 6.9-11

> I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. [10] They called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'

The church to whom John was writing were experiencing persecution from Roman authorities and Jewish neighbours. We might not experience this here in Tassie, but persecution has been the experience of many parts of the church through the ages, right up to the present. On Friday 5 people were killed in a church funeral in Jordan. In fact there were more Christians martyrs, those who were killed for their faith in Christ, in the 20th

[1] Matthew 24.6-8
[2] Matt 24.9

century, than in all the previous 19 centuries combined. The word martyr is the Greek word for witness, and these verses remind us that these are killed because of their witness, their testimony to Jesus. I'm reminded of the 21 Coptic martyrs beheaded by ISIS in Libya in February 2015.

Their place under the altar in John's vision refers to the altar of incense that was outside the holy of holies in the temple. Here the high priest offered prayers and sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice of atonement. So this symbolises that the martyrs are before God in his presence and under his spiritual protection, even though they have lost their lives. It also symbolises that their prayers go up to God and that in their suffering they share in the sufferings of Christ.

The cry of their innocent blood reaches up to God, but sadly they are told to wait a little longer until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed.[3]

The Day of the LORD - (Seal 6) - 6.12-17

This brings us to the 6th seal. Here John sees a great earthquake. The sun turns black. The moon turns to blood. The stars fall from the sky. The heavens are rolled up like a scroll and the mountains and islands are moved from their places. This is a reference to the Day of LORD prophesied by many of the Old Testament prophets. In Joel 2.31 we read:

> The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood
> before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.[4]

From Isaiah 34.4:

> All the stars in the sky will be dissolved
> and the heavens rolled up like a scroll;
> all the starry host will fall
> like withered leaves from the vine,
> like shrivelled figs from the fig-tree.

This is the day when God comes to judge the earth. We'll see the earthquake again in chapter 16.18. And in chapter 20.11, when the dead are judged, "the earth and the heavens fled", from the presence of the one on the throne.

Now is this literal or symbolic? On one level it doesn't matter. If this is final judgement that means this is the end of history and the end of this world as we know it. The Bible gives pictures of both destruction and continuity of creation through the day of judgement to the

[3] Revelation 6.11
[4] Joel 2.31, cf. 3.15-16

new creation. For my money though, I would see this as symbolic language pointing to the cosmic significance of the day of judgement.

The response of the peoples of the earth, from kings through to slaves is to hide from the face of God and the Lamb, "For the great day of their wrath has come and who can withstand it?"[5] It's like Adam and Eve in the garden hiding from God because of their sin. One commentator argues that just as the fundamental problem of humanity is idolatry, that is worshipping created things rather than the Creator, so the things of creation that people worship are stripped away in these verses so they stand spiritually naked on the day of judgement.[6]

The Army of the Lord - 7.1-17

The last line of chapter 6 literally reads, "who will be able to stand?" The answer to this question comes in chapter 7. Here the sequence of the 7 seals is paused and John sees another vision.

> After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. **2** Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: **3** 'Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.'

The ***4 winds*** that the angels hold back correspond to the 4 horsemen of seals 1-4. The ***seal*** the angel puts on the foreheads of the servants of God is a mark of God's protection on God's people. We're reminded of chapter 3 where Jesus says that for the one who is victorious, that is who perseveres and remains faithful to Christ, like the martyrs of chapter 6, "I will write on them the name of my God."[7] It's also a reference to 2 Timothy 2.19:

> God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.'

And also Ephesians 1.13:

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[5] Revelation 6.17

[6] See also Hosea 10.8: *The high places of wickedness will be destroyed – it is the sin of Israel. Thorns and thistles will grow up and cover their altars. Then they will say to the mountains, 'Cover us!' and to the hills, 'Fall on us!'*

[7] Revelation 3.12

> When you believed, you were marked in [Jesus] with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, [14] who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession.[8]

The seal is the Holy Spirit who shows that we belong to God and guarantees those who trust in Christ will inherit God's kingdom. God's servants may physically suffer the ravages of the 4 horsemen, even a martyr's death, but they will not be spiritually harmed. This seal on their foreheads stands in contrast to the mark of Beast that we see in chapter 13 given to all humanity who worship the Beast instead of the Lamb.[9] The Holy Spirit will empower all who bear the name of Christ to stand firm and remain faithful in the midst of suffering that comes from not conforming to the religious and political systems of this world that stand opposed to Jesus.

John then hears the number of those who were sealed: ***144,000***. It's a military census, recalling Numbers 1, with 12000 from each of the tribes of Israel. This is the number of the army that John *heard*, just like he *heard* about the conquering Lion of Judah. But just like in chapter 5 what he turns and *sees* is a surprising fulfillment through Jesus, the slain Lamb. in In verse 9 John sees,

> a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

This is the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham, that through his seed all peoples on earth would be blessed. It is a picture of the Church.

The 144,000 then is not a literal number (in contrast to what the Jehovah's Witnesses say), nor does it refer to the Jewish nation, either ethnic or the contemporary state of Israel. It refers to the Church, God's new covenant people. This is confirmed in verse 14. Who are this multi-ethnic, multi-lingual host that John sees who are dressed in white? The angel says,

> '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.

This of course is a reference to Jesus' sacrificial death for the forgiveness of our sins, and the washing clean of baptism. This is how they can stand before God - because they have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. And this is how the messianic army conquers. Not through killing our enemies, as the Pete Hegseth's of this world would have it, but through the Lamb who was slain. We trust in his saving death, and we also bear witness to the Lamb by loving their enemies and forgiving our persecutors even as we suffer.

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[8] Cf. Ephesians 4.30
[9] Revelation 13.8, 15-17

What about the ***great tribulation***? Well if you remember back to how John introduced himself back in chapter 1. "I John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus."[10] The word "suffering" is the same as "tribulation" in Greek. And John sees these three things as going together for everyone who follows Christ. If the kingdom comes with tribulation, then our job is to endure patiently. In chapter 3.10 Jesus says,

> Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

That is the promise being repeated in chapter 7. The great tribulation is the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world. But you might notice this sounds remarkably similar to what Jesus teaches us to pray in the Lord's prayer, "save us from the time of trial", or as the older translation puts it, "Lead us not into temptation". Likewise Jesus says in John 16.33:

> I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have tribulation (trouble). But take heart! I have overcome the world.

This tribulation is not a specific period before or after "the Rapture" as some would have it, but rather it is the general state of affairs before Jesus' return. If you like, we live in a world where the 4 horsemen are riding about causing havoc, and where the church suffers for Jesus' name, and where we face pressure from the world around us to compromise our faith.

The Final Judgement (Seal 7) - 8.1-5

In chapter 8, the Lamb opens the final scroll and there is silence in heaven for about half an hour. This is a reference to Zephaniah 1.7: "Be silent before the Sovereign Lord, for the day of the Lord is near."

In verse 2 John sees 7 angels who have 7 trumpets. This introduces the next vision and the next cycle of 7, like the 7 seals. We'll look at that next week in chapters 8-11. But before that vision, John returns to the vision of the 7 seals.

In verse 3 he sees another angel offering incense on the altar with the prayers of God's people. We're back at seal number 5 with the martyrs asking God, "how long before you judge the inhabitants of the earth?" These prayers rise up to God, and then the angel takes a censer with fire from the altar, "and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake."[11] This is the same earthquake as we saw

[10] Revelation 1.9
[11] Revelation 8.5

with seal number 6, it signals the day of judgment because God is at last answering the prayers of the martyrs. What this looks like we'll see in the following visions.

Ok, so let's summarise what we've seen.
The 4 horsemen symbolise the evils of war, conquest, famine and plague that we see throughout human history, even today. They are signs that the day of judgment is coming. At the same time, the church has suffered persecution and even death for Jesus' sake, right from the start and even through to today. The persecuted church cries out to God to bring his justice. God hears their prayers and he will bring justice on the Day of the Lord, at the end of history. In the present, while God's people may face suffering and even death, he protects them spiritually with the Holy Spirit so they are able to stand before his throne. Our future is secure, and therefore we need not fear death. We can endure suffering patiently trusting and obeying Jesus.

Let's finish with this wonderful promise for all those who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb - for all who trust in Jesus, for you and me.

> 'they are before the throne of God
> and serve him day and night in his temple;
> and he who sits on the throne
> will shelter them with his presence.
> 16 "Never again will they hunger;
> never again will they thirst.
> The sun will not beat down on them,"
> nor any scorching heat.
> 17 For the Lamb at the centre 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.'"