

Session 3 – Chapter 4:1-8:5 – Heaven and the opening of the seals

Take note of the OT background

Ch 4 & 5 are peppered with references to the visions in Daniel and Ezekiel, (esp Dan 7 and Ezk 1).

The throne room scene (ch 4)

Greek word for throne (singular) occurs 17 times in ch 4&5 – emphasising God is the ultimate ruler.

When the judgments in ch 6-11 are unleashed, they come from God's throne - totally under his control and according to his character, holy, just and merciful and, therefore, proportionate.

The One seated there is barely described, but cf Ezk 1:26-28; 10:1; Ex 24:10, 28:15-20; Rev 21.

Everything revolves around and takes its cue from the One on the throne. To get a right perspective on what is going on in the world, we need to start with the One who is over it all.

24 elders - most likely heavenly representatives of those who become children of God through Jesus and will one day rule with him.

why 24? Possibly that the new family is drawn from OT (12 sons of Israel) and NT (12 apostles), and of both Jews and Gentiles

sitting on thrones - reminder that human beings were created by God to rule

dressed in white – representing perseverance and not compromising their faith in Christ

Flashes of lightning, rumblings & peals of thunder - cf 8:5; 11:19; 16:18 at end of each series of seven, but also an echo of Ex 19:16-19 signifying the awesome presence of God

4 living creatures - contrast with 4 beasts in Dan 7:2-8 which represent oppressive human rulers. But or parallel with 4 living creatures in Ezk 1:4-24 which are heavenly beings round God's throne.

full of eyes to see everything going on, lots of wings to go wherever God sends them

best to see them as heavenly representatives of all animate life on the Earth

The whole focus is on worship of the One on the throne and on his attributes

Holiness – important for the calling on God's people to live lives that are distinct

Sovereignty and power – important for hope in the face of persecution

Eternal nature – important for confidence that God's purposes extend beyond this current life

24 elders casting their crowns acknowledges the authority they have is delegated by the Lord of Lords.

The songs - echo words of Isa 6:3 but also remind us everything that happens is according to God's will and purposes for creation. His will cannot be thwarted, even by powerful rulers & spiritual forces.

'You are worthy' used by Romans to greet arrival of the emperor in a triumphal procession

'Our Lord and God' - used in the worship of the emperor

By using these phrases, Christians would be asserting the supreme authority of their God, over any human being or other god, no matter how powerful

The appearance of Jesus in heaven (ch 5)

The scroll in the right hand of the One seated on the throne, by implication, must describe what God has planned, including his judgment upon all evil (cf Ezk 2v9ff).

No one was found worthy to open the scroll (v3 - see also Dan 7:9-14)

John was in anguish (v4) at the thought that God's justice might be prevented from taking place. Does injustice matter that deeply to us?

But an angel put his mind and heart at rest (v5)

behold the Lion of Judah - see Gen 49:9-10

the root of David has overcome (Gk word *nikao* - same word used in 7 letters) – see Isa 11:1

the fulfilment of promises made by God hundreds of years before

Jesus death on the cross, resurrection and ascension to heaven have accomplished all that is needed for the seals to be broken and the scroll opened.

But when John looks (v6)

what he sees is not a Lion (representing strength), but a Lamb (representing sacrifice)

The song the living creatures and elders sing to Jesus (v9&10) focuses on what he has accomplished through his sacrificial death on the cross.

he has *purchased for God people from every tribe, language, people & nation* (see also 7:9; 11:9; 13:7 & 14:6)

and has made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God (see Ex 19:6 and Dan 7:27), *and they will reign on the earth* (the goal of God's redemptive work, see 2:26-27; 3:21; 22:5)

By his sacrificial death Christ has taken control of the course of history and guaranteed its future for those who are in Him. We must not lose sight of that as we enter the chapters that deal with judgment

The song is taken up by thousands upon thousands of angels (see Dan 7:10) and then by the whole of creation united in worship of the One who sits on the throne and the Lamb

This vision is confirmation and assurance that in the consummated kingdom every creature welcomed there will be involved in the worship of God.

When does (or did) all this happen?

In light of ch 1-3, esp 3:21...

John's vision in ch 4-5 is best understood as what happened in heaven when Jesus returned there after his time on Earth

and in ch 6-7 as what began to take place immediately after that.

The breaking of the seals (ch 6)

The breaking of the 7 seals happens in a group of four (6:1-8) followed by a group of three (6:9-17) - as do the sounding of 7 trumpets in ch 8-9 and the pouring out of 7 bowls in ch 16.

The opening of the first seal does not result in the revealing of the whole scroll - that only happens once the 7th seal is broken and the seven trumpets begin to sound.

However, the unloosing of each seal could indicate the revelation of a part or summary of what was written about in more detail inside the scroll. The breaking of the seals may therefore be the unveiling of a series of preliminary judgements.

The group of the first four seals – each involving a rider on a coloured horse - introduce what are popularly known as the Four Horses of the Apocalypse. They bring conquest, war, famine, plague and death affecting people all over the world. For reference see...

Zech 6:1-8 and 1:8-12

Ezk 14:12-13

Lev 26:14-45

The context of these passages suggests these judgements affect unbelievers and believers alike.

God's purpose in calling on the 4 riders to initiate these judgments is two-fold

to punish those who disobey God, reject Jesus as the Messiah and persecute God's people
to refine and strengthen the faith of God's people

The riders are 'given' a crown (v2), the right to take peace from the earth (v4), power over a quarter of the earth to kill (v8)

Given by God, as all authority and right to judge comes from him. No one can administer God's judgment unless God has chosen to give them that power.

'The power to take peace from the earth' echoes Jesus' words in Matt 10:34. It is an uncomfortable truth that the elimination of evil will take away peace – but human efforts at peace are false and temporary

'A quart of wheat for a day's wages and three quarts of barley for a day's wages and do not damage the oil and wine.' speak of vastly inflated prices that accompany a famine. The exemption of oil and wine imply God has set limits on the impact of this judgment

Taken together these 4 judgments are the beginning of birth pains foretold by Jesus (Mt 24:1-8,29; Mk 13:1-8,24-25; Lk 21:5-11,25-26). They have been going on throughout the age of the Church and will do so right up to the end.

Taken with ch 4&5, they remind us, even if we live in a chaotic world, Christ still reigns. And, though we endure suffering, it is not by chance but within the purposes of God.

The breaking of the 5th seal (v9-10) initiates a cry for justice from the souls of those who have suffered and died for their faith as a result of the judgments precipitated by the 4 riders.

Their cry of *'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'* (v10, cf Ps 79:5-10) is a plea for God to defend his own name and character, to deal with sin and oppression and to vindicate those who've remained faithful

They're given a white robe (v11) symbolising a reversal of the verdict in human courts that found them guilty.

They're told to wait until the number of martyrs is complete (v11) – meaning the judgments associated with the 4 riders will continue and are not part of the final judgment

The ultimate answer to the martyrs' cry is given in v12-17 and the breaking of the 6th seal

The 6th seal introduces visions of cosmic disasters that reflect OT language for God's final judgment on the unbelieving and idolatrous (see Isa 13:10-13; 24:1-6, 17-23; 34:4-5; Ezk 32:6-8; Joel 2:10,30-31; 3:15-16 and also Mt 24:29; Mk 13:24-25; Acts 2:19-20)

Such scenes are meant to be taken symbolically rather than literally. Throughout Scripture it is clear that God loves his creation and intends to redeem it – so it does not make sense to interpret these verses to mean the cosmos is going to be destroyed.

References to the sun, moon and stars point to the idolatry that treated such created things as gods.

Isa 14:12-15 speaks of a particular star falling to earth, commonly taken to refer to Satan being cast out of heaven (see parallels in Rev 9:1 and 12:9).

'The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up' echoes the sequence in Isa 34:4-5 of the corrupt forces in heaven being judged first and the upper cosmos being removed, leaving the earth exposed to God's judgment.

The sealing of the servants of God (ch 7)

The sealing is an answer to the question posed in 6:17 – who can withstand the wrath of God and the Lamb? It is those who have been marked by God as His own.

The 144,000 are meant to be taken symbolically as representing all who are in Christ (see v9)

144,000 = 12x12x10x10x10 (12 and 10 both symbolical of completeness)

They are sealed (or marked) in order to protect them, not from the physical effects of the judgments initiated by the 4 riders or during the great tribulation to come, but from the snatching away of their faith by the Devil and his evil forces (cf Ex 12:1-13 and Ezk 9:1-11)

They are marked as servants (slaves – *doulos*) belonging to God and owing service to Him (see Ex 28:11-21, 28-38)

Their sealing (or marking) is God's initiative and his way of guaranteeing them his presence and protection

Verses 15-17 describe the heavenly reward for those who have been sealed and who persevere through all the tribulation that will be unleashed by the 4 riders.