

## Revelation 6 and 7

Today is our third week on the Book of Revelation and I'll quickly review the events of the first two weeks for those who missed them or have forgotten some of the important points. Revelation's introductory chapter includes a prologue and John's commission to write what he has seen in his vision of his trip to heaven. In anticipation of what is to follow, the prologue supplies the book's title, which is "the revelation of Jesus Christ", and information about that revelation. The chain of communication begins with God, who gave the revelation to Jesus Christ. Using an angel to communicate data to John, the prophetic writer, the Revelation was to be shared with God's servants.

The content of the revelation consists of "things that must happen". The time of fulfilment of the revelation is "soon". And because of those words, "things that must happen" or "what is to take place after this", hundreds of kooks and charlatans down through the centuries have had a go at "what is to take place after this". From Joachim of Fiore to John Hagee the tele-evangelist, anyone can have a go at what that "after this" might mean. This is all nonsense.

Revelation is most assuredly not about Russia and China, the European Common Market, the selling tags on Procter and Gamble soap products, the Rapture at the end of days, the saving of the few and the damnation of the many, the need for the state of Israel to exist in order to ensure that when Jesus returns to Jerusalem there will be some Jews who will either choose to become Christians or

will join all unbelieving Christians and others – a short list includes Roman Catholics, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, Mormons, all Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, etc. – some three billion or so of the world's people – in the lake of fire while the chosen few thousand will sing loud hymns of praise while they watch their fellow humans writhe in agony for all eternity. If you think this is simply caricatured, you have probably not listened to or watched tele-evangelists such as Hagee and others, expound the meaning of the Revelation.

Revelation is about one thing and only one thing: God wins and the powers of evil lose. And at the end of all things, God will make "all things new", not "all new things". Consequently, all will live in a vast city together, Jews and Christians and Muslims, and all others. Even the once nasty kings of the earth will find their place there. Yes, even tele-evangelists, who will be very surprised to see who their neighbours will be! The key to the purpose of God's life for the world does not consist of power; conquering does not mean victory in any traditional sense. It means that the slain lamb is the key to life's meaning.

The method of communicating the revelation is through dramatic representations, using many symbolic pictures. John received these dramatizations and recorded them so that readers could interpret them. The prologue to Revelation also stresses the blessing accompanying the public reading and obedient compliance with the ethical standards expressed in the remainder of the book.

Another feature of the prologue is its epistolary address to seven churches located in the first-century Roman province of Asia. The final part of the prologue furnishes the theme for the book, a theme built on two Old Testament verses that predict the Messiah's return to establish his kingdom on earth.

John, the writer of this Revelation is a man who calls himself a "brother in the faith", a Jewish prophet writing visions he claimed to have received while on the island of Patmos, located off the coast of Asia Minor in present-day Turkey. This John of Patmos, was not the son of Zebedee, the brother of James, the Evangelist who wrote the Gospel according to John.

John of Patmos starts with seven messages conveyed through seven moral representatives of the seven churches. Although this was not part of the assigned readings for our journey through this book, being aware of these letters will help to better understand this Revelation.

These messages, through seven moral representatives of the seven churches, are to prepare churches in seven cities to observe certain ethical standards. The persuasive motivation for compliance comes from the severity of predicted judgments to be described after completion of the seven messages.

Spiritual conditions in the churches varied. Ephesus was a church of loveless orthodoxy. Smyrman Christians were faithful in facing persecution and martyrdom. Pergamum was a church that practised indiscriminate tolerance. The Thyatirans were compromisers in the bad sense. In Sardis, professing Christians were

complacent. Because of their faithfulness to the Lord, Philadelphian believers received Christ's promise of deliverance from their enemies and from the coming hour of trial. Laodicean Christianity was deficient because of its lukewarmness.

Christ urged the faithful in these churches to persevere in the face of opposition and offered the promise of his imminent coming to deliver them. To the disobedient, he threatened imminent punishment through the judgments about to be portrayed in the chapters we read the past two Sundays.

Obviously, Christ did not return during the lives of the generation to whom John wrote, but the nature of the seven churches makes them representative not only of the rest of the churches of their time, but also churches of today and the entire age until Christ comes. The churches, beginning with Ephesus and ending with Laodicea, do not represent successive periods of church history, but rather, they represent conditions existing simultaneously in the state of the various churches. The seven messages prepare the churches to respond to a description of what Christ's anticipated coming will mean to them and the rest of the world.

Last week we saw John's vision bring him to the heavenly throne room where he encountered an image of God holding a scroll in His hand. The scroll was sealed with seven seals which only the Lion of Judah, the Lamb of God, can open. The seven seals are those that bind the closed scroll the Lamb has just been proclaimed worthy to open. This scene builds directly upon, and is continuous with, what preceded. As each seal is broken, we get more insight into what the future holds –

although not necessarily as a chronological sequence of events.

Before John's Revelation is finished, he will present three major series of "sevens" – seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. Each series is built over an identical and quite sophisticated pattern – which, in itself, suggests that they are meant to be read as *parallel descriptions of the same period* rather than as a strict chronological sequence of events.

In today's continuing reading of Revelation, the first six seals on the scroll are opened. The first seal brings the first horseman on the White Horse. It is this first horseman that has given commentators and theologians the most trouble. Admittedly, almost every detail of the description of the first horseman points toward Christ. In a later scene, a rider on a white horse clearly and explicitly is identified as Christ; and even here the rider wears a crown and is a conqueror. Consequently, many scholars are ready to say that this horseman is Christ.

Yet, to go this way is to violate the Revelator's sense of symmetry, destroy the finesse of his structure, and foul up his theology. The other three riders obviously represent forces of Evil; and John simply could not have Christ riding in conjunction with them – the movement would have to be a counter one. However, there is possibly another interpretation which is so appropriate on every count that it must be correct.

It is not accidental that here we encounter details suggesting Christ. Remember that John's custom is to portray Evil as being a counterfeit imposter of

the Good; and here he is introducing a fake Christ, the perversion of Christ that is AntiChrist. True, John does not portray him under this image at any other place in the book; but this is very much the "right" point for AntiChrist to make his initial appearance.

For one thing, Christ has just been introduced as the Lamb who is qualified to break the seals; so the introduction of Antichrist would serve John's sense of symmetry. For another, Antichrist would immediately provide the quartet with its natural leader.

This would make complete sense to have them charge across the world in concert. Further, we are at the point in John's story where AntiChrist is called for. The scene now is shifting from heaven to earth and that we are entering the end-time period. And as John will make abundantly clear, it is precisely on earth and during this period that AntiChrist has his (apparent) rule. Of course, his mount is actually the Trojan Horse whitewashed, and his crown nothing but cardboard and tinfoil; but the world does not know that. He comes on strong; and he is the world's messiah.

Consider that the end-time actually begins with the crucifixion of Christ. That event carries the weight of "a fact of world history", while only eyes of faith perceive the resurrection. And it is to AntiChrist's interest to keep things that way; as long as he can lead the world to believe that nothing of importance has happened since Good Friday, he has it made. And look around you; it is evident, that the Fancy Fake

is still riding high and his act is still packing houses everywhere from here to Hell and back. The only real power Evil possesses is that of seduction.

John does give us one solid clue to the first horseman. Christ already has been introduced as wielder of the two-edged sword; and whenever he appears with a weapon, this is it. But the present rider carries a bow which is never mentioned in connection with Christ. Throughout the Old Testament there is a tendency to associate the bow and arrow with the enemies of Israel, especially in Ezekiel and the account of Gog and his armies. The first horseman represents exactly the right place for introducing AntiChrist and the right way of doing it: the "arch-deceiver" rides on, making like a conqueror but bringing nothing but trouble in his train.

His first follower, bloody red and slashing away in splendid slaughter, clearly stands for War. With the third horseman, the black of starvation, the scales of the food-seller, and the announcement from price control headquarters – all point toward his being Famine. Bringing up the rear, riding double, comes the duo that, in this world, always and forever catches the stragglers and speaks the last word, Death and Hades.

But what history – past, present, or future – is John trying to characterize with these figures of the four horsemen? – most likely his own day, the day of the seven hard-put congregations in Asia Minor, and our own day. It would be no challenge to document the contemporary presence of this foursome; any newspaper or newscast would easily provide this information. And there's no telling how many days yet to

come these four figures will endure. They show no signs of packing up to leave.

When John reaches that point in his visions, he stops. The suffering and destruction of the first six seals are overwhelming, and so he introduces a break, a timeout that he uses to lift the vision of God's people from the difficulties of the present to the glories of the future. So, before the seventh seal and the intensified trumpet judgments, God gives us a panorama of salvation and the evangelistic activity of this period known as Tribulation or Daniel's Seventieth Week. The fifth seal was a revelation concerning the martyrs who had been killed for their faith in Christ.

John gives us a preview of the way things are to be. What he sees is a vast international, multi-racial, multi-lingual throng of people so great that no one could count it. The people he sees wear white robes and carry palm branches. The robe is an important piece of clothing in the Bible. It signals not only outward clothing, but reveals who the person is, what her or his status is. And so the prodigal son is given a new robe, not just so that he would have something clean to wear but as an indication of his restored place in the family. Believers, then, wear the white robe of purity, and they carry palm branches as signs of victory and joy following war.

The martyrs "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb". Washing something in blood (or red in general) does not turn something white. But here the blood of the Lamb purifies the martyrs and takes away their sin, and so their robes are white.

Believers stand before God's throne and worship God, who in turn, will shelter them. The word translated as "shelter" is the word that also is translated as "dwell". God's presence, will remain with them. In a world in which subsistence was the normal pattern of life, the vision of no more hunger or thirst is communicated at a visceral level.

Those who find in John's Revelation scenes of blood and doom and destruction have not read the book for the metaphorical writing that it is. The key to life is service, a service that may lead to suffering and giving and dying. Little wonder that the Romans did not want John mouthing such things into a Roman world built on the pax romana, a "peace" insured by armies and fighting and glorious death. The Revelation of John contradicts the Roman view of the world at every turn.

In the final verse, John once more plays with language and images. It is the Lamb who will be the shepherd who leads God's people to the "springs of the water of life". *"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."* With that vision in their minds and hearts, those who listen to the reading of Revelation are ready to experience the breaking of the seventh and final seal – which is followed immediately by the next cycle of seven end-time woes, that of the trumpets. They continue their journey through John's visions by having given thanks to the one who has saved them and who provides everything needed for life.

John's Revelation is a great book of the promise of God to create a world where all have a place, where hierarchies disappear, where all live together in

harmony and peace. No one should be allowed to make this book into a thing of scary fear, of partisan choice, of believing rightly lest you end in fire.

No! It is a book of hope, founded in love, and the gift of the lamb for all of the people of God.

Amen.