

REVELATION 6-9

John's vision is intended to offer hope in troubled times. What happens if things are going to get worse before they get better? How are people to hold on to hope?

If suffering is seen within a larger drama whose conclusion will be redemption, then suffering is more endurable. The six seals are opened one by one in Chapter 6, and following the interlude of Chapter 7, the seventh seal is opened, followed by 7 angels blowing 7 trumpets in Chapters 8-9. Whether it is the opening of seals or the blowing of trumpets, the reader is invited to imagine the horrific suffering that will take place, but also the glorious vindication of the faithful.

Some of the suffering is past, some is present and some will be future.

The first of the 4 horses and horsemen, represent the threat from the skilled Parthian archers on horseback who were the undoing of the Roman troops some several decades before Revelation was written. This is followed by the second horseman who is permitted to take peace from the earth, which represents the declining Roman Empire and the 'peace' it had established. The result was bloody chaos, revolution, and the wrath of Rome in response. The third horseman represents the lack of government laws, allowing rich landowners to hold back the planting of basic food crops in order to harvest luxury items with higher return of profit. This precipitated large scale food shortage and hunger. Finally, the 4th horseman represents the death that ensued in the last decade of the 1st century which included famine and earthquake.

Once we come to the 5th seal, however, the representations refer to what is taking place in the present, and that is the suffering of Christians under persecution. Their prayer is one of vindication as well as revenge. Their prayers are to be answered in the near future, but several things have yet to take place before the end. First, the full number of those who are known to God as God's own, have yet to live and suffer. Second, as we shall see further below, God wants to give more time to the evil to repent.

The 6th seal is referring to the near future. Major cataclysms will take place and those who rule the world now and think they are all-powerful and invincible will be reduced to terror-stricken, fragile creatures seeking to escape and hide for their lives. These events will establish once and for all who has the power and who holds history in eternal hands.

Yes, suffering is intense, painful, and difficult. But it is temporary and its end will not be long. Believers will be vindicated and their oppressors will be judged. God's loving and just rule will be victorious in the end.

Chapter 7 is an interlude in the description of the sufferings about to come (the 6th seal is just the beginning!). There is great suffering to come upon the earth and its inhabitants.

Before this takes place, however, the angel of the Lord will account for (mark or seal) all those who are God's children in spirit and in truth. In this regard there are Jews (represented by the 144,000 from the 12 tribes) and gentiles (represented by the great multitude from every nation, tribe, language, and peoples). These will all be joined together as one, offering exuberant worship and praise to God, the Lamb will be their shepherd, their suffering will be eliminated and every tear will be wiped from their eyes. 144,000 is a multiple of 12 but also reflects God's great, forgiving, and inclusive generosity. No-one who is open to God will be rejected. God has room for many, many people and only those who are stubbornly and wickedly resistant will be excluded by their own choice (Chapter 9: 20-21)

Chapter 8 begins with the 7th seal and silence, for this parallels the 7 days of creation and the fact that God rested on the 7th day. The world as we know it was created in 7 days. The 7 seals reflect the way this world order will end. The rest of 8-9 offers graphic description of intense destruction and suffering, and amazingly by the end, those human beings who have survived continue to refuse to repent, continuing in their murderous, idolatrous, thieving, sexually violent and exploitative ways. They have consciously and stubbornly excluded themselves from the reign of God.

Whether in the opening of the seals or the blowing of the trumpets, or whether in the promises to the faithful in paradise, the vision of Revelation takes many references from different parts of the Old Testament and the gospels. The references are just far too many to recite here. But they include references from the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, the gospels, Zechariah, as well as some books of the Apocrypha (Jewish sacred writing from the period between the Old and New Testaments). These references are woven together in unique ways in Revelation, and they take on a new life in its message.

Here is a repeated literary scheme in the book. The fearful and destructive part is directed to all the wicked who are unrepentant to the stubborn end and who are bent on killing and destroying. The hopeful parts are directed to those who have already suffered and will suffer at the hands of the wicked, but are promised vindication, comfort, restoration and eternal joy and peace.

The Seven Seals:
(6:1-8:5)

1. White horse
2. Red horse
3. Black horse
4. Pale horse
5. The martyrs
6. The earthquake
 - a. 144,000 sealed
 - b. Great multitude
7. The seven trumpets

The seven Trumpets:
(8:6-11:19)

1. Earth 1/3 scorched
2. Sea 1/3 turned to blood
3. Water 1/3 made bitter
4. Sun 1/3 darkened
5. The locust plague
6. Fiendish cavalry
 - a. The eaten scroll
 - b. The two witnesses
7. The consummation

The Seven Bowls:
(15:1-16:21)

1. Painful sores
2. Sea of blood
3. Rivers of blood
4. Scorching sun
5. Total darkness
6. Froglike demons
 - a. The heavenly call
 - b. Gathering for battle
7. Earthquake levels Babylon

First, the only matters in the rest of the book that are not included in this scheme are chapters 12–14 and 17–22, which have their own role to play in the overall narrative, and which will be noted in detail at the proper time. Second, this kind of schematizing belongs to the apocalyptic form of writing, and therefore is not to be considered a blow-by-blow unfolding of the future. Third, both the trumpets and the bowls clearly echo the plagues of Egypt (the book of Exodus)—a matter the earliest readers could scarcely have missed—while the bowls themselves also echo the trumpets. In so doing John is inviting these early Christian readers to recognize similarities between Pharaoh’s persecutions of Israel and the Empire’s soon-coming persecution of the church.

So, how does all this connect with us today? Where are we tempted, like the people addressed by Revelation, tempted to give in to fear, despair, going with the flow rather than resisting and being true to ourselves and to justice before God? We may not suffer persecution for our beliefs, way of life or cultural background, but we may be tempted to give in to things that we know are not right, practices that are comfortable but also a compromise of our spirits, undermining the demands of justice and love. We may prefer to hold on to resentment or prejudice. We may prefer to give in to others because it’s too hard to resist or stand our ground. We may prefer to avoid conflict or look for it too quickly. We may give in to despair or hopelessness, or we may be quick to judge and slow to try to listen or understand. Are we part of God’s mission of compassion to heal this broken world, or are we focussed on ourselves and our needs and to heck with the world out there? Revelation offers a vision that asserts that eternally speaking God rules (because eternity is ruled by love rather than force, coercion, and violence), even though now, in this world, chaos, evil and injustice can hold sway. It’s easy to believe this is all there is.

Faith gives us courage to live toward something higher in ourselves now and for eternity, even if it will cost us so to live in the present and future. Do you have the courage of faith? Where do you need courage in your life right now?