

Revealing Revelation: Visions of Judgment Sunday, 11/14/21

Last week we looked at the throne of God in John's Revelation and took comfort from knowing that God's powerful and gracious reign continues forever at the center of all things. The exalted Christ, the Lamb of God, will unseal the scroll, ensuring God's perfect plan will be brought to completion, regardless of any opposition we might encounter in this life.

This morning we come to grips with the judgments of Revelation that commence with the unsealing of the seals on the scroll. If the image of Jesus with blazing eyes and a sword emerging from his mouth was scary, surely the many judgments pronounced and executed in Revelation capture the fearful attention and imagination of the church unlike anything else in Scripture. And why not? We've just been promised that Christ's authority and power to judge is absolute and eternal. But as Christians, we know that "God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline."¹ Why then might we find these scary images of judgment in a revelation of God intended to encourage God's people? Let's sample some of the judgments and see what we can learn.

The vision of the first seal is pretty simple, the first of what is to be four riders on horseback: "[A] white horse ... Its rider carried a bow, and a crown was placed on his head. He rode out to win many battles and gain the victory." Three more riders follow the first in successive seals, each horse of a different color and each rider with a different power.

Remember that I said Revelation assumes you have a working knowledge of the Old Testament, and especially the Old Testament prophets. The primary Scriptural reference to the four horsemen is found in Zechariah chapters one and six. Zechariah was written to offer hope to God's people following their long exile, to assure them that God would restore them following their many years of suffering. The horsemen of Zechariah ride off to execute divine judgement- not on God's people, but on their oppressors. Remember, this was time when people endured military conquest as a way of life, and so it's natural that horsemen or chariots might be used to represent deliverance.

The four horsemen of Revelation are often taken to be generally representative of military conquest, war, famine, and death. The key to understanding these seals is

¹ 2Timothy 1:7. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

appreciating that Christ isn't simply unleashing these things on the earth capriciously or vindictively. For reasons we can't fully understand, conquest, war, famine, and death remain a part of the Christian experience in this life. We're to find hope, not in the suffering that comes with those experiences, but in knowing that their occurrence is a part of the unveiling of God's perfect plan for creation.

The fifth seal is more straight forward, an accounting of the martyrs, those who gave their lives for their faith. The martyrs appear under a table, most likely a comparison of the shed blood of the martyrs with the Temple practice of pouring the blood of sacrificial animals at the foot of the altar.² The blood of an animal or person was considered to represent life.

In the vision, the martyrs, and by extension, any of us who suffer for our faith, are encouraged to patiently endure until the God will finally bring judgment on their persecutors. One estimate is that by the year 325, as many as two million Christians had been martyred. Paradoxically, the church continued to grow, giving rise to Tertullian's famous assertion, "The blood of the Martyrs is the seed of the Church."³ Suffering even to the point of death need not be a sign that God has lost control. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ should have made that abundantly clear to us.

The sixth seal seems to answer the question, "Who and what will be affected by the judgments of God?" The answer is everybody and everything. Earthquakes, solar eclipses, and falling stars all signal that something dramatic, powerful, and divine is about to change everything. Even the sky is said to be "rolled up like a scroll."⁴ I can't even imagine how bewildering that might be! Everyone from the most powerful kings of the earth to its slaves will face the judgment of Christ. No amount of wealth and power will be enough to save us.

If you're relying on your earthly power or wealth to save you, this is grim news indeed. But for those who cling to Christ, this is hopeful, because we know that when we stand before our Lord for final judgment, it's the worthiness of Christ that we can claim if we believe in our hearts and confess with our tongues that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is Lord.

² Zondervan, NIV Study Bible, note on Revelation 6:9.

³ https://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/anceint_christian_martyrdom.htm

⁴ Revelation 6:14. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

The judgments roll on in Revelation, past the seven seals to the seven trumpets and seven bowls. I'll let you explore those on your own. If you don't know how to use the many cross-referencing tools in your study Bible, this will be a great time to learn, as you jump around your Bible, discovering Biblical references and allusions you've probably never seen before.

But now, let's fast forward to the final major judgments in Revelation that come prior to the restoration of creation, our focus for next week. I'm reading in Revelation 20, from the beginning, in the New Living Translation. **{Read Revelation 20:1-5, 7-15 NLT}**

Chapter 20 is probably the most hotly contested chapter of Revelation, and perhaps even in the entire Bible, and over the years its produced three main camps of interpretation. Let's see which one you might fall in, if at all.

Postmillennialists, in the yellow part of the image, interpret Revelation as teaching that there will be a literal 1,000 year binding of Satan, beginning sometime in the future and ending with the second coming of Christ and the last judgment.

Amillennialists, like me, in the green, believe that the 1,000 years of binding began with the resurrection of Jesus and his defeat of death and will end with the second coming of Christ and the last judgment. Jesus himself has told us that nobody other than the Father can know when that will be.

And then there are all sorts of variations of premillennialism, which is the belief that Jesus will return prior to the 1,000 years. I like to keep it a bit simpler. Jesus died on a cross to save us from our sins, defeated death when he rose from the grave, and will return when we'll all be raised from the dead and appear before Him to be judged.

It's not difficult to see how the image of Satan being chained up in the abyss might be hopeful. The Hebrew and Greek words we get the name "Satan" from does mean "adversary" after all.⁵ All of us have adversaries in this life, but the early Christians took this to a level most of us can't relate to, being put to death by the Roman Empire in horrific ways. Still, don't we sometimes confront behavior that is so abhorrent, so evil, that it seems apparent that Satan is being served, weather knowingly or not?

⁵ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/satan>

If you've ever watched an episode of batman, then you know that tying up your adversary never works forever. Somehow, they always escape. Similarly, after Satan's unbinding, John's Revelation puts an exclamation point on the end of Satan by hurling Satan into a lake of burning Sulphur, along with death itself.

Have you ever burned Sulphur? It smells like rotten eggs. The gas produced, sulfur dioxide, is toxic to people and even plants.⁶ A fitting end to the one who would oppose God. Satan loses one more time, for all time.

Our fate, on the other hand, is to be quite different, according to John. At the end of Revelation 20, we return to the throne room of Revelation 5, where God remains seated on the throne, still firmly in control, now to pronounce final judgment on the dead "according to what they had done."⁷ For victims of persecution or wrongdoing, that sounds like reassuring news. But what about me, and what about you? Surely each of us can produce a lengthy list of attitudes and behaviors from the last year alone that we know were not Christ-honoring. Does that mean that our names aren't written in the Book of Life?

By no means! As Paul put it so clearly in Ephesians 2, "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it."⁸ We do have to remember with humility and sober thought the words of James as well, who wrote, "How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds."⁹ In other words, we are indeed saved by faith, but real faith can't help but bear the fruit of good deeds.

Judgment understandably makes us squirm, and divine judgment even more so. None of us like to confront our own sin. What is it that allowed the persecuted church to find hope in judgment, despite the unquestionable fact that they too were far from perfect people? Perhaps they understood that hope doesn't come from dwelling on sin and judgment, but on the one whom God has appointed judge, the one they pledged their lives to follow as their

⁶ <http://npic.orst.edu/faq/burningsulfur.html>

⁷ Revelation 20:12. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

⁸ Ephesians 2:8-9. Ibid

⁹ James 2:18. Ibid

Lord. If divine judgment is a necessary step in bringing about the Kingdom of God, can you imagine anyone you'd rather have sitting on the throne than Jesus? "I am the way, the truth, and the life,"¹⁰ said Jesus. Put all your trust in Him.

Please take some time now to reflect on the hope you have in Jesus.



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¹⁰ John 14:6. Ibid