

REVELATION: WEEK 3

STEVE WATSON | DAILY BIBLE GUIDE | 2018



Monday, March 5

Revelation 6:1-17

Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!” ²I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

³When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, “Come!” ⁴And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.

⁵When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, “Come!” I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, ⁶and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!”

⁷When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, “Come!” ⁸I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.

⁹When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; ¹⁰they cried out with a loud voice, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” ¹¹They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

¹²When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; ¹⁷for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”

Points of Interest

- “seven seals” – In Ch. 5, Jesus the Lamb arrived to open a scroll with seven seals, with a version of human history from God’s perspective, through a kaleidoscopic lens of symbolic imagery.
- “white horse” – Evoking the crazy history of Revelation’s interpretation, the seals begin with the famous “four horsemen of the apocalypse.” Each represents some of the worst trials of human history – military invasion, death in war, economic injustice, famine, disease. Unlike the Lamb, the horses are aggressive & violent. They don’t suffer for others’ good, but slaughter & cause suffering.

- “its rider was permitted” – While these horses and riders are not from God or of God, they are permitted by God. I think John means this to be comforting – that even the worst collective human evil is still under God’s control. Yet it is disturbing as well. While Revelation promises God’s victory and our victory over evil, it doesn’t try to answer why God doesn’t insist on a history without violence and suffering. Perhaps the image of Jesus knocking is helpful here – God will gently intervene in history but not crush our will and micromanage. Perhaps we can remember the slaughtered Lamb as well – that Jesus interrupts human violence by becoming a conquering victim, suffering with us now and promising a future age without violence and suffering.
- “Sovereign Lord” – The first century and all of history also includes the unjust suffering of people who refuse to respect corrupt human authorities but pledge their allegiance to God instead.
- “How long” – Human victims utter the age-old question that is stated twenty times in the Hebrew prayer book of the psalms.
- “white robe” – Seems odd at first that the innocent victims of history are given a lousy bathrobe and told to wait around. The white robe, though, is an answer to part of the “how long” question. It symbolizes victory. Unjust suffering is always temporary. God will vindicate.
- “a great earthquake” – The cataclysm of the sixth seal is typical symbolic biblical language for massive societal and political upheaval. This too is occasionally part of history.
- “the wrath of the Lamb” – This is an unexpected, ironic phrase. Overpowering anger isn’t the first thing we’d expect from a gentle, slaughtered lamb! Many theologians – particularly from Eastern traditions – point out that anytime God is personified, there is symbolism at work. Here, the symbol would be for the consequences of human evil. God doesn’t magically wipe out the enormous suffering that comes with personal and collective human violence. God allows the fearsome consequences captured in this chapter, leading John to ask, “How can we endure?” We’ll come back to that tomorrow.

Spiritual Exercise

In the midst of Revelation’s drama, we see this week our third of seven scenes of worship. These remind us that in the drama of our times, we can still find solidarity with one another and connect with a good God who listens to us through worship. Each day this week, you’re invited to withdraw from the stress and urgency of daily life and reflect on God’s power and goodness. Today, consider that in all of the very worst evil and suffering in the human story, both present and past, God is still alive, still good, and still promises victory and redemption. Let God you know that is true, or that you hope that is true, or even that you want to hope that is true.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for each of your six by name, that wherever they are asking “How long?” they will experience hope, faith, and courage.

Tuesday, March 6

Revelation 7:1-17

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on earth or sea or against any tree. ²I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, ³saying, “Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads.”

⁴And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel:

⁵From the tribe of Judah twelve thousand sealed,

from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand,

⁶from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand,

⁷from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand,

⁸from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand,

from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand sealed.

⁹After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and

before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom

and thanksgiving and honor

and power and might

be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.”

Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,

and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Points of Interest

- “the seal of the living God” – Kings had these stamps to indicate a letter was under their power and protection. This angel has either been marked as God’s or symbolically is flying around with God’s seal to mark others.
- “a seal on their foreheads” – This reminds me of the old story of guilty brother Cain being given a mark on his forehead by God so that others wouldn’t murder him. At the end of chapter six, the rulers of the earth asked how they would endure history’s trials. The answer here is to come under God’s protection. Experience teaches us this won’t protect us from the struggles of

circumstance that all humans face, but experience also teaches us that God can often give people other-worldly joy and courage that is its own kind of protection.

- “people of Israel” – This chapter has two visions of people of God. I wonder if this first vision is the worshipping community in the present or past. It’s large (in John’s numerology, also perfect – 12 groups of 12,000), but you can name them and count them, and they live under a form of God’s protection during hard times.
- “great multitude...from every nation” – In the second part of the vision, the community is uncountable and unnamable – drawn from all peoples on the earth. These people maintain their beautiful human diversity but share in common victory and common love and gratitude for God. This strikes me as the future destiny of God’s people, one we get only occasional glimpses of in this life.
- “Salvation belongs to our God” – God isn’t hoarding the power to save but sharing it widely. God does what human empire claims to do but can’t – rescue and liberate us, effect joy and freedom.
- “white in the blood of the Lamb” – Chemically, this makes no sense, of course. No one washes their clothes in blood to clean them – don’t try this at home, please. But John is saying the slaughtered Lamb doesn’t only represent the sacrificial, co-suffering love of Jesus but is the means by which humans find cleansing and victory.
- “The Lamb ... will be their shepherd” – Another irony. This Lamb steps up and leads the flock. Jesus will guide us toward rest and satisfaction and fulfillment.
- “wipe away every tear” – Maybe I’m working the poetry too literally here, but God’s promise isn’t that we’ll never cry again, but that we’ll have each tear personally wiped away as it falls. I find this presence and comfort more moving and hopeful than a flat, low-emotion existence.

Spiritual Exercise

In the midst of Revelation’s drama, we see this week our third of seven scenes of worship. These remind us that in the drama of our times, we can still find solidarity with one another and connect with a good God who listens to us through worship. Each day this week, you’re invited to withdraw from the stress and urgency of daily life and reflect on God’s power and goodness. Consider today this chapter’s image for your destiny. Express to God any gratitude or praise it stirs in you.

A Direction for Prayer

For your city: Think of some people who are hungry, thirsty, or have eyes full of tears. Pray that God will start to fulfill the promises of today’s passage for them.

Wednesday, March 7

Revelation 8:1-13

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ²And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

³Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. ⁴And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. ⁵Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

⁶Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.

⁷The first angel blew his trumpet, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were hurled to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.

⁸The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea. ⁹A third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

¹⁰The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. ¹¹The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many died from the water, because it was made bitter.

¹²The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light was darkened; a third of the day was kept from shining, and likewise the night.

¹³Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew in midheaven, "Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!"

Points of Interest

- "seventh seal" – After a dramatic pause, we return to the unfolding of history from God's perspective. John's been honest. It hasn't been going so well for people.
- "silence in heaven" – One more dramatic pause. God waits, there is a rare moment of silence in the noisy scene of Revelation's throne room for God to do what none of the ancient gods were ever purported to do: God listens to people. God will wait to hear what people have to say.
- "the prayers of the saints" – If the purpose of heaven's pause is for God to hear prayers, poetically at least, we're told they make a difference. The prayers are like temple incense, meaning they reach God and are pleasing to God, and they impact what God returns to the earth. That sounds great until we see what comes next – more chaos and violence. How is this in any way an answer to prayer? The many commentaries I've read largely sidestep this question. I think the only satisfactory answer is that the first six trumpets seem to recapitulate the first six seals, with new imagery. The seventh trumpet, though, will take us somewhere new. Perhaps the answer to prayer comes then. But we'll have to wait until next week in our guide – when we look at Revelation 11 – to see it. Maybe there's a lesson here. God has compassion for us but doesn't share our experience of time and maybe takes the long view sometimes on answering our

prayers.

- “the seven trumpets” – These aren’t our modern brass instruments, but rams’ horns. They had more to do with power – king’s announcements and battle cries – than music. The seven trumpets together seem to make up the seventh seal, seven inside of seven in John’s complicated symbolic universe.
- “hail and fire” – The first four trumpets tell the same story of human suffering under the violence of nations that the first four seals told. But they use more vivid language for it, often the language of the plagues on Egypt from the Bible’s Exodus story.
- “the star is Wormwood” – The one image that isn’t from Exodus evokes another Hebrew scripture – Jeremiah 9 – of something good that is ruined. Wormwood was a shrub with some medicinal use but also bitterness. Every time humans spoil the environment, every time we mix power into sex, every good word we use to manipulate, all the ways we corrupt something good, we rewrite the bitter story of the third trumpet for ourselves.
- “woe, woe, woe” – Revelation is brutally honest about how hard life is and how tragic much of human history has been and still will be. The eagle is right – it is full of woe. John makes a subtle poetic point, though. In Revelation, he’ll mark the first of these two woes in upcoming chapters, but the third will never come. God will rescue us from our worst possible story we could write for ourselves.

Spiritual Exercise

Each day this week, you’re invited to withdraw from the stress and urgency of daily life and reflect on God’s power and goodness. Consider today this chapter’s image for your destiny. Return to yesterday’s image of God wiping your tears. If anything in your life is troubling you, tell God about that today. Thank God that woe will have an end and that God is listening to you. Imagine God as attentive to you, catching each tear that falls.

A Direction for Prayer

Today, be the person who prays for God’s mercy on each of your six, sparing them from the worst that life could bring, and asking God to rewrite the end to any bad stories playing out in their lives.

Thursday, March 8

Revelation 9:1-21

And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit; ²he opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. ³Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given authority like the authority of scorpions of the earth. ⁴They were told not to damage the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. ⁵They were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion when it stings someone. ⁶And in those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will flee from them.

⁷In appearance the locusts were like horses equipped for battle. On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, ⁸their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; ⁹they had scales like iron breastplates, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. ¹⁰They have tails like scorpions, with stingers, and in their tails is their power to harm people for five months. ¹¹They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon.

Points of Interest

- A public service announcement: This might be a good time to remember how weird Revelation is. Have you noticed yet? John wrote this almost two thousand years ago, steeped in the symbolic literary conventions of a way of writing about faith and life that we're not used to. The best way to read this isn't to try to decode everything but let it wash over you like a vivid zombie movie – enjoying the strangeness and chewing on the meaning in the parts that speak to you.
- “the bottomless pit” – The tale of the fifth trumpet might be the spookiest scene in all Revelation. Death personified emerges from a smoky pit.
- “not to damage the grass” – A reminder that the tragic tale of history unfolding under the seven seals is descriptive, not prescriptive. This is a God's-eye view on our history, not God's will being

¹²The first woe has passed. There are still two woes to come.

¹³Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, ¹⁴saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.” ¹⁵So the four angels were released, who had been held ready for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, to kill a third of humankind. ¹⁶The number of the troops of cavalry was two hundred million; I heard their number. ¹⁷And this was how I saw the horses in my vision: the riders wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur; the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. ¹⁸By these three plagues a third of humankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. ¹⁹For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails; their tails are like serpents, having heads; and with them they inflict harm.

²⁰The rest of humankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands or give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk. ²¹And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their fornication or their thefts.

done on earth. But under God's watch, there's always a limit to evil and violence.

- “they will long to die, but death will flee from them” – Misery and psychic pain are part of the worst suffering. I think of victims of the Holocaust or the Middle Passage or in John's age, the Roman siege of Jerusalem, and the suffering victims preferring death over their fate. Revelation exposes the violent underbelly of all human civilizations, our own included.
- “locusts like horses” – In his locust army of death, you can't fault the vividness of John's imagination!
- “his name is Abaddon” – In Hebrew, this is the pit of death personified; in Greek, “destroyer.” Who is this? Not just one person. Abaddon is Emperor Nero, scapegoating and killing Christians for his city's fire. Abaddon is Hitler, exterminating classes of people he despises. Abaddon is the drunken man abusing his step-daughter. Abaddon is Satan, the personified spiritual force of all human evil, the “star fallen from heaven.” Abaddon is death in its many wretched forms.
- “the number of the troops .. was two hundred million” – As with the sixth seal, the sixth trumpet works its way toward violent cataclysm – an army even larger than Rome's, a violence more total than we can imagine.
- “a third of humankind was killed” – good news, bad news here. A third of humankind is horrific, apocalyptic violence. And yet still two thirds survive. The worst of human history, the spirit of Abaddon, cannot prevail.
- “did not repent” – There is a long history of viewing God's judgment as the source of human suffering. From this point of view, God causes human suffering to punish us or get us to change our ways. The word “plague” at the end evokes the Exodus story, when God hurts the Egyptian people and economy to push them to free their Hebrew slaves. There's a shocking admission in Revelation – this does not work. Punishment doesn't usually change people. Perhaps God will lead humans toward repentance through kindness, love, and self-sacrifice instead.

Spiritual Exercise

Each day this week, you're invited to withdraw from the stress and urgency of daily life and reflect on God's power and goodness. Praise God that while human authorities use violence and threats and suffering to advance their own agenda, God uses love and kindness to advance our healing.

A Direction for Prayer

All times and cultures have the spirit of Abaddon at work within them. Pray that your church will announce and embody good news that runs counter to the violence and psychic misery of the times you live in.

Friday, March 9

Revelation 10:1-11

And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. ²He held a little scroll open in his hand. Setting his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, ³he gave a great shout, like a lion roaring. And when he shouted, the seven thunders sounded. ⁴And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down." ⁵Then the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and the land

raised his right hand to heaven

⁶and swore by him who lives forever and ever,

who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it: "There will be no more delay, ⁷but in the days when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets."

⁸Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, "Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." ⁹So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, "Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth." ¹⁰So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter.

¹¹Then they said to me, "You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

Points of Interest

- "another mighty angel . . . wrapped in a cloud" – While we're waiting for the seventh trumpet, which is the climax of the seven seals, an enormous messenger of God bursts onto the scene. A digression? Dramatic build-up? Part of the non-linear unfolding of God's purposes on the earth? Hard to say.
- "face was like the sun" – This angel looks kind of like the opening vision of Jesus from Revelation 1. Maybe that's part of being God's messenger, that for your message to be valid, you also need to look and sound like God's beautiful self.
- "He held a little scroll" – Kind of a funny image, this mighty angel with his mini-scroll in hand. What does it say?
- "do not write it down" – Stay focused, John. Maybe in much of our speech about God, there's more sound than fury, more distracting buzz than helpful message. Or maybe this moment reminds us that there's lots to God's world that we're not going to understand.
- "raise his right hand to heaven" – The messenger is taking an oath, promising that whatever is being announced that will complete history, it is sure to be true. You can bank on it.
- "when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled" – More dramatic build up. We've been hearing revelation about the way things are with God and the way things are on earth. It sounds like the end of this section is going to bring the two together –

that the previously unknown ways of God will come to fruition.

- “Take it, and eat” – These words sound like communion. But rather than welcoming the person of Christ into his body, John is welcoming the word of God, all that is sweet and all that is bitter. I like this as an image of listening to what God has to say. Don’t just think about it, take it in, chew on it, digest, eat. Internalize God’s message.
- “many people and nations” – This line again stands for all people on the earth. So far, we’ve heard about all peoples suffering under the evil of history and the violence of empire. John reveals Rome and all dominating human societies to largely be up to no good for most of us. We’ve also heard about great multitudes from all peoples being comforted and fed and satisfied as they worship God together. The underbelly of our reality that we don’t usually see, and the great hope of God that we don’t usually believe – both are core to the message of Revelation.

Spiritual Exercise

Each day this week, you’re invited to withdraw from the stress and urgency of daily life and reflect on God’s power and goodness. Have you ever felt that you’ve heard a true word from God? Perhaps while listening to a sermon or reading the Bible or in prayer? Perhaps through the words in a song or the words of a friend? A god who isn’t silent and isn’t a violent bully, but who speaks good news of truth and who listens is a god we can love. Praise God for being communicative and ask God if you like, to deepen your experience of God speaking and listening to you.

A Direction for Prayer

For your six, pray that each will come to hear the voice of God to them, whatever messenger God uses to communicate.