

What does Chapter 5 tell us about the opening of the scroll and its seals?

It describes the scroll as having writing on both sides and seven seals. It is not an actual scroll. It represents the plan God has for the world. The writing is the details of God's plan. The seals secure seven elements of His plan. They symbolise the fact that God's plan is sealed to everyone; only God knows how He will fulfil His plan.

We are told that no-one in heaven or on earth was able to open the scroll or read it. And John weeps at this because he appreciates the importance of the scroll to God and to men. If the scroll is God's plan: reading the scroll is metaphoric of knowing the details of His plan and opening the seals is metaphoric of having the power to put His plan into effect.

Chapter 5 encourages us not to weep, but to Sursum Corda, because: "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." The Lion of the tribe of Judah is well known to be Jesus, a descendant of Judah. The symbol declares that Christ has unique authority to open the seals. Unique authority to know God's plan and put it into action.

Jesus' triumph is juxtaposed to his ability to open the scroll and its seals. This implies a connection between His triumph over evil and death and his authority to put God's plan into effect. On the cross, Jesus conquered all his enemies. He now reigns in Heaven, with the power to control the course of history.

In a word, what is God's plan? 'Redemption'. His intent is to redeem as many as people from the ways of evil so they might share eternity with him. By remaining obedient even unto death, Jesus showed redemption is possible (with his help). In Chapter 1, Jesus is called the 'firstborn from the dead'. He is the first person born into God's Redeemed Kingdom.

Chapter 5 describes the joy in Heaven at the authority and triumph of the Lamb. The praises they give the lamb can help us to understand the opening of the seals that follows.

The living creatures and elders fall down and worship Jesus. And they sing a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." (Rev. 5:9-10)

Their praise confirms that it is the obedience of Christ unto death that qualifies Him to open the scroll and the seals. They also declare that the result of Christ's death is the purchase of men for God, from every tribe, language, people and nation.

Their praise clearly indicates that the things written in the scroll relate to both obedience to God and the purchase of men for God.

In Chapter 6, Jesus begins to open the seals of the scroll. Actions in heaven are determining events on earth. The opening of the first four seals in heaven releases four horsemen into the earth.

The first horse is white, with a rider carrying a bow, who is given a crown and rides out as a conqueror bent on conquest (v. 2). The identity of the rider on the white horse is a controversial matter. There is disagreement even among the most eminent theologians. I haven't time to cover their interpretations but they are covered in my notes¹.

The interpretation which seems most faithful to the text is that the rider is the Holy Spirit. First, because it accords with the chronology of the redemptive plan. In John's gospel, Jesus promises to send the Spirit, the Counsellor, after he is gone. It is, therefore, appropriate, that it is the Lamb who was slain that opens the first seal to release the Spirit. Acts 2 describes what happens on earth. How, soon after Jesus' ascension, Christ received the Spirit from the Father and poured it out on to men, beginning at Pentecost. Scripture agrees that the Risen Christ sending the Spirit is the first step in the Lord's post-resurrection redemptive plan. The first rider is given a crown, which is also chronologically appropriate, if this is the crown of victory Christ won upon the cross (Rev 5:5).

The reference to the rider being bent on conquest is also consistent with the missionary sending and overcoming power of the Spirit. Chapter 16 of John's gospel tells us that the Spirit is sent by Christ to help us overcome the world. The Spirit is our spiritual guide and our strength in the spiritual battles we face. Paul tells us that in order to truly live we must put to death the misdeeds of the body by the Spirit (Romans 8).

Throughout the Bible, the colour white represents Christ. The Spirit naturally shares the colour white as the Spirit and Christ are one in our Triune God. But it is not logical for the rider to actually be Christ because Christ is the Lamb that releases the rider. The living creature 'like a lion' that calls the first rider forth may also symbolise the aspect of Christ that is like a Lion. Remember in Chapter 5, the Lamb that opens the seal is honoured as the Lion of Judah.

The redemptive plan has begun! Jesus has given his authority to the Spirit and sent Him out into the earth bent on conquering, bent on purchasing men for God.

The Spirit's work began in Jerusalem but He is still conquering souls for God today. **Allelujah!**

¹ A second interpretation is that the rider is the Anti-Christ. They believe the rider must be waging an unjust war of devastation because the riders which follow bring death. They suggest the rider is white because he is meant to look like Christ, though he is not Christ. This is not an attractive interpretation as white is the symbol of righteousness and Christ throughout the Bible and the Bible itself never subverts or lies. If Jesus intended to identify the Anti-Christ it would have been more consistent for him to have revealed the deception in the rider's appearance. Such as by saying the rider 'appeared white'. Claims the rider is not faithful or true and wages war unjustly have no basis in the text. In fact, the opposite is true, as we shall see. In the context of the honour given to the seal-opener in Chapter 5, it is a nonsense for the first step in the redemptive plan to be the Anti-Christ. A third interpretation is that the rider is Christ. Christ appears as a rider on a white horse in Revelation Chapter 19. However, it is something of a nonsense for this rider to be Christ because Christ is the Lamb that opens the first seal

When Christ opens the second, third and fourth seals three further riders are released.

These are the famous riders of the Apocalypse. For obvious reasons, people tend to associate the word Apocalypse with cataclysmic disaster but it actually refers to John's Revelation as a whole. That is, the events that must take place between the resurrection and return of Christ. So the riders of the Apocalypse simply means the riders of the Revelation.

Nevertheless, these riders do bring disaster. The second horse is fiery red, symbolising bloodshed, whether through war, civil strife or persecution. The rider receives a large sword and is given authority to take peace from the earth so people will kill one another. The third horse is black, symbolising famine conditions. He is holding a pair of scales in his hand. And a voice declares an imbalanced and meagre provision of food will be paid in return for our work. The fourth horse is a pale green, symbolising death and hades. These riders were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth (which may be a reference to disease carrying wild beasts).

God is not releasing evil into the world for 'He is light and Him there is no darkness at all!' I believe this passage is actually intended to encourage us. It declares that, no matter what happens, God and the Lamb reign, setting limits to evil and bringing their own wise purposes to realization.

We must take care identifying the symbols with particular world events. But we know many of these disasters are in the world. There has been bloodshed, perhaps ever increasing: empire-building, civil war, revolution and world war. There has been famine: from drought, flood and corruption and recently inflation. And there has been increasingly terrible disease. Bubonic plague carried by rats and recently the HIV/AIDs pandemic and the bird flu scare.

The book of Revelation reveals the evil forces which are arrayed against the power of God. These evils are not formally introduced until the latter half of the book, most notably in chapters 12 to 13. Although not formally introduced, they are clearly at work in the vision of the seals, destroying a quarter of the earth by sword, famine and plague.

The vision of the seals does not focus on the battle of good vs. evil, this will follow. It focuses on the sovereignty of God. The events are evil but Christ remains in control. Christ opens the seals. Christ alone permits the riders to harm one quarter of the earth. In other words, He limits the release of bloodshed, famine and death: to one quarter of what it would otherwise be!

It is interesting to consider the role the terrible riders have in God's redemptive plan. We know the troubles of life have the potential to awaken people to the emptiness of their way of life. Paul tells us, in the first chapter of Romans, that the judgements of God are revealed from Heaven in the consequences of our evil behaviour. It was the suicide of a University friend that caused me to question the way I was living and properly consider God.

This may be why the first rider is seen carrying a bow. Ezekiel records the Lord saying: "When I shoot at you with my deadly and destructive arrows of famine, I will shoot to destroy you. I will send famine and wild beasts against you, and they will leave you childless. Plague and bloodshed will sweep through you, and I will bring the sword against you. (Ezek 5:16-17). It seems possible there is a causal relation between the first rider with his bow and the three terrible riders that follow. That is, the first rider anticipates the three that will follow and speeds them on their way. They are like arrows from his bow.

Instead of the appearance of another horse, the breaking of the fifth seal reveals the souls of the Christian martyrs under the altar. There seems to be general agreement amongst commentators that they are martyrs. Personally, I wonder if they do not simply reveal all those to have died in Christ. After all, Jesus say we are only worthy of Him if we take up our cross daily. And, as we will see, when the number of martyrs is completed, in Chapter 7, they appear to be the whole church.

"How long . . . until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" the Souls cry out to God. As the Theologian George Eldon Ladd comments this 'is the blood of the martyrs calling for vindication, not the martyrs themselves crying out for personal vengeance'.

It echoes the biblical prayers for justice in the psalms and elsewhere. Remember Jesus' question, "will not God bring about justice [literally "retribution"] for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?" (Lk 18:7). God's love and forgiveness can never be divorced from His justice, or judgment of evil.

It is an eschatological prayer. The return of Christ brings his judgement to the world. As such, the prayer of the souls under the altar is no different in its import from "your kingdom come" (Mt 6:10) or "come, O Lord" (the Aramaic prayer, maranatha) with its accompanying curse on anyone who "does not love the Lord" (in 1 Cor 16:22).

In the context of the opening of the seals, the prayer of the souls that have died in the Lord is a prayer for the opening of the seals to continue to its appointed end.

After the breaking of the sixth seal, there was a great earthquake, followed by appalling cosmic convulsions. The sun turned black and the moon red, the stars fell as late figs fall from the tree, the sky crumpled like a piece of paper, the mountains slid into the valleys and the islands sank into the ocean. And survivors hid from more terrible disasters to come.

These should not to be interpreted as literal events. They could well be symbolic of social or political upheaval.

Clearly the events are significant. They begin with a huge shaking of the foundations, perhaps of society, which reverberates throughout the world. The stars represent things we think are certain and permanent. People look at stars, or great buildings like Canary Wharf, as evidence that their life will continue as they know it. In the Revelation, these things collapse. And other symbols of permanence, like mountains and valleys, implode into each other. It is cataclysmic. The things the world thinks are certain are destroyed.

We are living in a time of turmoil which resonates with this imagery. Many thought the financial system was permanent but with little warning it collapsed. The old stars of the financial world, like RBS, have fallen from the tree like figs.

In the past weeks, everyone has been discussing the credit crunch. I have had a number of interesting discussions about the value of money. As governments pump ever larger numbers into the system, it is possible that money will devalue before our eyes. In the same way as an island slides into the sea. **{ZIM DOLLAR}** An amount which once would have bought you the largest business in a country won't even buy you bread.

I am not saying these things are the Great Earthquake. But speaking as one close to the action in the City, I see similarities. I think it is worth considering how the Great Earthquake might look, in light of current events.

We are called to be alert to the events of the Great Earthquake because they are the signs of the end. Talking of the End times, Jesus told his disciples that "in those days, following that distress, `the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.'" (Mk 13:24-26). John sees the terrible events of the earthquake as heralding the Second Coming of Jesus. The prophecy in Chapter 1:7 ("Look, he is coming with the clouds") is almost, but not quite, fulfilled.

What effect do these events have on people? We do not hear that men turn to God. We are told they run and hide.

And a question is raised: "the great day of wrath has come, who can stand?". Clearly, those hiding in the rocks cannot stand.

But there are those who will "stand" in the great day of wrath. Those who have been prepared and protected by the work of the spirit through the tribulations of life. The vision of the sixth seal now turns to these people.

I believe the visions of people in Chapter 7 are the focus of the sixth seal.

In Chapter 7, God promises deliverance from the judgments of the Great Earthquake. In the fifth seal, He told the martyrs to be patient for the "the [full] number of their fellow servants and brothers" to be complete. The sixth seal marks the completion of that group (see 7:4).

John sees four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree (7:1). All the disasters of the Great Earthquake have been wrapped up in the single image of "wind."

Another angel (v. 2), supplies the reason for the angels restraint: 'until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God' (v. 3). Again the imagery is drawn from Ezekiel's visions, where a "man clothed in linen" was told to "go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it". Those so marked are spared the destruction threatening the city.

Notice that John does not claim to have seen the sealing ritual, only that he heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000, 12,000 from each of Israel's twelve tribes (v. 4). The fact that the number is heard is a clue that symbolic interpretation is needed. Many have erred by taking this image literally. Famously, the Jehovah's Witnesses identified themselves as the 144,000 and suggested the End would come when their number reached 144,000. Unfortunately for them, and the rest of us, their number exceeded 144,000.

Then John sees the number he heard but what he sees is quite different from what he heard. Just as he saw a Lamb that was slain when "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" had been announced in Chapter 5 (:5). Here, instead of 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel, he sees a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb (v. 9).

These are two pictures of the same redeemed community of God, viewed from different perspectives.

The first community is assembled like soldiers in battle array. The church militant on earth. In the second, they are assembled before God, their conflicts past – the church triumphant in heaven.

The first community are called 'the servants of our God' (v.3) and are sealed on the forehead to indicate they belong to God. The number 144,000 is an obvious symbol for the complete church (12 x 12 x 1000 (to represent the size of the church)).

They are presented as the twelve tribes of Israel because throughout the New Testament the church is seen as 'the Israel of God', and a 'chosen people .. a holy nation' (Gal 6:16; 1 Pet 2:9).

The second crowd is a 'great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language' (v9).

In it, God's promise to Abraham is fulfilled, to give him a posterity as numerous as the sand and the stars, and through him to bless all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1).

The unnumbered crowd are standing before the Lord and enjoying the blessings of their kingly rule.

The wear white robes of righteousness. By which they can be recognized as of the same group as the souls under the altar (who were given which robes in chapter 6, 6:11). This connection testifies to the continuity between the fifth and the sixth seals.

And the multitude waive palms of victory and sing loud songs of worship to God and to the Lamb.

All heaven joins their worship for heaven lives in continuous celebration.

Every Sunday, we are rehearsing for this eschatological concert.

How can we be sure we belong to this redeemed community?

One of the elders expressed this very anxiety asking: "These in white robes – who are they and where did they come from" (7:13). He then proceeds to answer his own question. This is intended to encourage readers that his answer can be trusted. He does not need to be questioned because he speaks the mind of God who knows the mind of man².

The Elder gives two answers to his question.

On the one hand, this multitude 'have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb'. We cannot stand before God's throne in the tattered rags of our own morality, but only if we have been cleaned by the blood of the Lamb who died for us.

On the other hand, he says they 'have come out of the great tribulation'. He is not referring to the specific tribulation between the appearance of the Antichrist and the return of Christ, which appears later in the book, because all the redeemed are present.

He is surely referring to the Christian life as a whole, which the New Testament repeatedly designates a time of tribulation. Remember Jesus' encouragement: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." They stand before the throne of God because only those who suffer with Christ will be glorified with him, Romans 8:17.

The sixth seal concludes with the blessedness of God's people.

God promises of vindication for those who suffer for his name. He will be our tent, we will never be hungry or thirsty again, the Lamb will be our shepherd, leading us to springs of living water, and God will wipe away all our tears.

The trials of life are a necessary part of God's redemptive plan. But when the full number have been redeemed these trials shall be removed.

We are encouraged to trust God's gracious promise. John does not actually "see" the blessings of heaven, not here or in Chapter 21. Again they are heard to represent a promise which is to be taken on faith. For "we live by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7). We must trust in His promise of vindication and healing and the end to conflict, lack and woe.

² It is notable that the elder both asks and answers the crucial question, while John is a passive (and ignorant) observer. A striking feature of Revelation is that John never asks a question in the entire book. This follows a principle upheld in early Christian writing that the Spirit of God "is not asked questions, but .. speaks all things of itself because it is from above" (Hermas Mandates 11.5-6; see Aune 1983:226-27). The same principle was at work in John's Gospel when Jesus told his disciples, "In that day you will no longer ask me anything" (Jn 16:23), and the disciples said, "Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you come from God" (Jn 16:30). The effect of the elder's initiative is to assure John's readers that the elder's explanation of the innumerable multitude comes from God and can be trusted.

We have finished chapter 7 but - if you are still awake - you will have noticed we have only opened six seals.

The seventh seal is not opened until chapter 8. In true sitcom fashion, the vision of the seven seals will be 'continued next week'.

It has been an eventful journey!

Beginning with Christ's victory in resurrection and ending on the edge of the End.

The Spirit is out conquering men for God, with the authority of the Lamb.

We remain in a time of violent disturbance and suffering, whilst the blood of Christians cries out for justice.

The Lord urges us to patience and faith and holds off his wrath until the full number have been redeemed.

In places its a disturbing vision. But the eye of faith looks beyond the disturbances:

- to the Lamb who breaks the seals and controls the course of history; and
- to the redemption of the complete number of God's people and the blessings promised.

4000 wds

Lets stand and give thanks.

I thought it might be nice if we began by rehearsing the praise we will accord to the Lamb as the great multitude.

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.

They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: **"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."**

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

"Amen!

Praise and glory

and wisdom and thanks and honour

and power and strength

be to our God for ever and ever.

Amen!"