
The Suffering of the Church

Revelation 6:1-17

Russ Kennedy

Vantage Point was a 2008 movie about the attempted assassination of the president of the USA. 8 strangers; 8 points of view; 8 stories of what happened – a montage of viewpoints.

Multiple cameras on the same scene...

We are entering the main sections of the book of Revelation. I believe that this is the way the book is written. The same events seen through many different lenses.

We need to locate ourselves in the book's structure.

Connections – the immediate setting of Revelation 5:6-10:

⁶And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. ⁸And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
¹⁰and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”

So there is the scroll that figures so large in our text tonight. The reference here is to a rolled up parchment that is sealed with wax as you unroll it. We are not talking about a literal scroll. It is an apocalyptic device to cluster a series of visions together. We know this because when the seal is broken and the parchment unrolled, something is seen, not something is read.

Remember that we are in a section whose parallel is in Revelation 17:1-19:8. The verbal parallels are illustrated next.

The Great Sufferings

Revelation 4:1-8:1	Revelation 17:1-19:8
Throne, elders, living creatures (4; 5:11; 7:11)	Throne, elders, living creatures (19:4)
Was, and is, and is to come (4:8)	Was, and is not, and yet is (17:8, 11)
Book with seven seals (5:1)	Book of life (17:8)
"Come and see" (6:1, 3, 5, 7)	"Come here, I will show you" (17:1)
Seal of God in foreheads (7:2, 3)	Name of Babylon on forehead (17:5)
Them that were slain for the word of God (6:9)	The martyrs; all that were slain (17:6; 18:24)
"How long will you not judge and avenge our blood" (6:10)	"He has judged...and has avenged the blood" (19:2)
Great multitude (7:9)	Great multitude (19:6)
They have washed their robes and made them white (7:14)	Made herself ready... Dressed in fine linen, clean and white (19:7, 8)

We also want to locate ourselves using the dramatic structure suggested by Beale.

Seven Seals: already and not-yet judgments on the world (4:1–8:1)

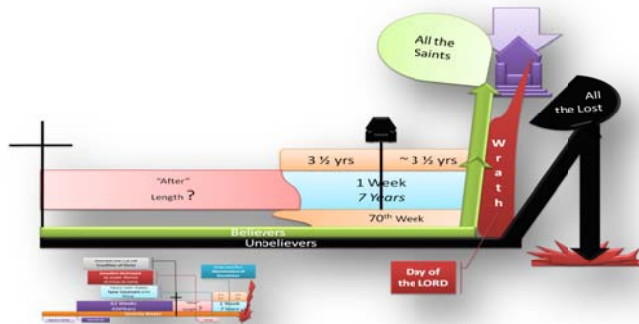
Prelude: the conquering lamb-lion on heaven's throne (4:1–5:14)

Vision: opening of the book, judgments initiated by the conquering horsemen and completed directly by God (6:1–17; 8:1)

Interlude: saints protected, receiving final salvation from the lamb, and clothed in white (ch. 7)

This structure of Prelude, Vision and Interlude will repeat in every section and is an extraordinarily helpful insight.

Locate ourselves in time using Jesus' teaching from which a great deal in this chapter is drawn.



³ As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" ⁴ And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

⁹ "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

¹⁵ "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), ¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁷ Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, ¹⁸ and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. ¹⁹ And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! ²⁰ Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. ²¹ For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. ²² And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. ²³ Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. ²⁴ For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶ So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. ²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

²⁹ "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will

be shaken. ³⁰ Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

³² "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

This is what Jesus taught and Matthew wrote about the how the world ends and how the people of God arrive safely home and God's kingdom comes. In the book of Revelation, we are in the throne room of heaven where the worthy heaven's lion and heaven's lamb has taken the seven-sealed book and is prepared to open it. What is about to unfold brings this age to an end. Behind the montage of shifting scenes we must hear the triumphant chants and the singing of heaven's King, his cherubim and seraphim and the rolling thunder of myriads of angelic voices.

Four Seals and Four Living Creatures (v. 1-8)

Four of the seals are grouped together visually and verbally. There are 4 seals, 4 beasts, 4 horsemen. In this there is an intentional connection to ***Zechariah 1:7-17***

⁷ On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month of Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying, ⁸ "I saw in the night, and behold, a man riding on a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen, and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses. ⁹ Then I said, 'What are these, my lord?' The angel who talked with me said to me, 'I will show you what they are.' ¹⁰ So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, 'These are they whom the Lord has sent to patrol the earth.' ¹¹ And they answered the angel of the Lord who was standing among the myrtle trees, and said, 'We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth remains at rest.' ¹² Then the angel of the Lord said, 'O Lord of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these seventy years?' ¹³ And the Lord answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. ¹⁴ So the angel who talked with me said to me, 'Cry out, Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. ¹⁵ And I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster. ¹⁶ Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. ¹⁷ Cry out again, Thus says the Lord of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.' "

These four horsemen patrol the earth and found the pagan Gentiles at rest while Jerusalem lay in ruins. Now, the four horsemen are unleashed to bring disasters upon the pagan Gen-

tiles as God brings peace and prosperity to His people (represented by Zion and Jerusalem).

White Horse and a Conqueror

(v. 1-2)

The first seal reveals a white horse and the rise of a great conqueror...

¹ Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" ² And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.

This first seal introduces the pattern of the four. A seal is opened. One of the four creatures around the throne commands, "Come". John looks and sees a horse and rider.

John sees a great white horse ridden by a someone who has been given crown. He has a bow. He is riding forth conquering and to conquer. He is succeeding in his purpose.

Many commentators believe that this is Christ and some, Christ through the gospel. A great deal is made of white here as though the rider is himself clothed in white. However, the text only says that this conqueror is riding on a white horse. The imagery is similar to that of Revelation 19:11.

But I would see an antithetical parallel. This conqueror appears like Christ but is not. This personage is the one referred to in Daniel 9:26-27. He may be the prince who is to come at the end of days who will make a covenant, break it with a religious abomination and will seek to destroy God's people until he is brought to a sudden end. This would correspond to Matthew 25 and to 2 Thessalonians 2.

²⁶ And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed.

²⁷ And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator."

The comfort for God's people is that this personage is given to carry out his purpose by God. He is not merely carrying out his will; he is serving the larger purposes of God.

Scarlet Horse and War

(v. 3-4)

The second seal reveals a red horse and the rise of global wars and conflicts...

³ When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" ⁴ And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

John is shown the red horse and rider who are empowered to end peace and make war. In the last days before the end, Jesus and Paul told us that there will be ever more and greater wars that will spread across the face of the earth. This leads to massive destruction of life and property.

Black Horse and Scarcity**(v. 5-6)**

The third seal reveals a black horse with scarcity and famine...

⁵ When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. ⁶ And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!"

Even to us who are not used to open market places, the imagery is vivid and visceral. This rider brings scarcity and famine in the sources of bread. Yet, God protects the oil and wine. So the terrible days that are to come are still in the hands of God. There may be scarcity and want; but God is still in control and will restrain the destruction.

Pale Horse and Slaughter**(v. 7-8)**

The fourth seal reveals a pale horse and mass destruction of human life...

⁷ When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" ⁸ And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

As the last days unfold, the destruction leads to widespread death. So war, famine, sickness and attacks by beasts will result in terrible destruction of human life. Whether the fourth of the earth refers to geography or population is not clear. Other texts tell us of both. There will be almost total annihilation in some areas of the earth and there will be widespread death over the whole of the earth.

What do all of these portend? That the last days will be very much like some of the apocalyptic movies. A great conqueror is unleashed upon the earth. As the last days unfold, widespread war will lead to famine, disease, and fearsome animal attacks. God's wrath is begun. Humanity will be paying the horrible price of rebellion against the great King.

Fifth Seal and the Slain Souls**(v. 9-11)**

⁹ When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. ¹⁰ They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" ¹¹ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

The fifth seal, the fifth facet of God's sovereign purposes and providence, reveals the sacrifice of the saints. Like the Lamb, they too have been slaughtered for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of the Word and the Witness.

Martyred for the Faith

The church has a long and storied history of its martyrs. We are not talking about the cheap suicides of Muslim fanatics; no, they did not die killing others. No, we are talking about the sacrificial slaughter of saints who simply, humbly, courageously stood for magnificence of Christ and for the message of the cross. They died saving others.

Pleading for Justice

Because they see clearly from heaven's vantage point, they cry out pleading for justice. Why must humble, loving people, speaking truth be led out to stakes and gallows, to swords and beasts, to fire and massacre? How does the justice of God wait? How long till the wicked feel the edge of the wrath of God? When will all be brought to right?

Waiting for the Full Number

Wait. This is God's Word to suffering people. This word is said to these souls in heaven but it is for the comfort of those souls suffering on earth. God will gather in all His elect into salvation. But there is an ordained number of martyrs that must be sacrificed under the sword. Wait. This is God's will.

That is what chapter 7 will be about. It will be about the sealing and saving of the full number of the elect, of God's people.

Why should we wait? Because of the next seal...

Sixth Seal and the Wrath of the Lamb (v. 12-17)

The sixth seal unfolds in day of the wrath of the King on the throne and the Lamb...

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

The End of the World (v. 12-14)

This fearsome time is the short period of the wrath of God, the Day of the Lord, just before the end. In apocalyptic language these verses relate the frightening collapse of all that we have thought of as stable and enduring. Here is a mighty shaking of the earth that moves the mountains. Here is dust across the sun and moon, darkness unimaginable. Stars fall as the universe is ripped like a torn fabric. No book, no movie can come even close to describe the destructive horrors of that day.

The book of Joel and 2 Peter have warned us of this day. In language just as powerful, the creation seems to shake and tear and tremble.

The Panic of the Lost (v. 15-16)

What panic ensues. Death is more favorable than this living hell. All humanity left alive on the earth see emerging through the rift in the universe the great throne of God. Running, hiding, seeking refuge for...

The Day of Wrath (v. 16-17)

The day of the wrath of God has come. It has lain silent gathering and storing up until this day. Even the mighty, the powerful, the great see that what is unfolding is not just

natural disasters. This is the wrath of the one sitting on the throne and His Lamb. Beware when the King comes. Beware, when the lamb roars.

Seventh Seal and Heaven's Silence

(8:1)

^{8:1} When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

The next seal is opened and all heaven is silent. Chapter 7 is an interlude. In this moment, the praises stop, the singing ceases, the chants halt. We do not know why. We just know that it does. It is heaven holding its breath.

Reflect and Respond

I encourage you to go back and read Daniel 9 and 11. Read Joel. Read Matthew 24-25. Read 1 and 2 Thessalonians. This will help frame your thinking for what is unfolding here. You will recognize the language and some of the events.

God is unwinding the universe. He is not letting it spin slowly down to die. He is bringing His great plan for the ages to culmination. This is not the slow fading repetition of a song; it is the as yet ominous but building triumph of the King.

We know little of the suffering in which this letter was written. We know little of the persecution experienced by those to whom this letter was written. But even in the twilight of our place and time, how encouraging these words are. It is not just that justice will prevail, but the righteous wrath of the Lamb will prosecute our case. And there is no defense. All wrongs will be righted. All that brings Christian's pain in this fallen world will be set right.

O, this should cause us to hide ourselves, not in the rocks and caves and places of the world, but in the Lamb Himself. There and there alone will we be safe from His wrath. Are you?