

WEEK FOUR

OPENING THE SEALS

Context is always important - in life, in relationships, and in reading the Bible. These days we're likely to see a political ad that lifts a phrase out of a longer talk that someone said, distorting the meaning completely, and then uses that to smear the person. We also have all had encounters with someone where they seemed angry or unfriendly, only to find out that person was having an extremely bad day - their problem was not so much with us, but with some bigger problem they were grappling with. And when we read the Bible, it's so easy to take a verse or chapter and to read it without understanding what came before and what comes after, and thus miss the whole point of the passage.

That's true here in Revelation 6. We are entering here what can be easy to believe is the 'scary' part of this book. Dark things are happening, and it is understandable if fears about the world or even God can start to creep into our minds and hearts as we make our way through. But context is everything here. And this week, we'll remind ourselves about the context of Revelation 6.

The Bible is realistic. It doesn't cover over the hurts of this world with pastel wallpaper. It doesn't tell us to put a band-aid on the wounds of the fall. It also doesn't tell us that we're without hope in the world and that we should simply throw our hands up in despair. Instead, Scripture tells the truth about the fallen world we know we all live in, and yet also gives us hope.

That combination of truthfulness and hope is what we'll see this week as we look at Revelation 6.

Begin by asking God to open your eyes and heart through the Holy Spirit. Then, read Revelation 6 slowly three times. As you do, use a pen or pencil to mark anything that is noteworthy to you: repeated words and phrases, specific attributes of God or particular phrases or concepts that are puzzling.

REVELATION 6:1-17 (ESV)

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.

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.

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[a] of wheat for a denarius,[b] and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!"

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.

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[c] should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

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[d] 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?"

PERSONAL STUDY PART I: WHAT TIME IS IT (AGAIN)?

Whenever the book of Revelation is talked about or read, it's usually not long before people begin to make predictions about when the events that are described will take place and what we should be on the lookout for to know that they are in fact happening. All of that usually takes place in an atmosphere of fear and trepidation. In this part of your preparation for the coming week's session, we're going to get to the heart of those issues - both the question of the when, and also the way the Bible invites us to feel about these events.

Revelation 6 begins with our attention focused on an object that we discussed last week: a scroll, sealed with seven seals. From the work and teaching of last week, what do you know about this scroll? Was its opening something to be feared, or something that was hoped for? Look in particular at Revelation 5:1-4.

Compare John's desires in Revelation 5 to your initial reactions to reading Revelation 6. Is there a difference between the two? If so, why do you think that is? (If you're not sure, don't worry - we'll come back to this.)

Then the seals begin to be opened. What happens, though, is perhaps not what we might expect given our answers to the previous question. In verses 1-8, we see the first four seals opened. Each of these seals leads to the emergence of a horseman who rides forth. Use the space below to write out who emerges and then observations you make.

Seals	Color of Horse	Observations
<i>First Seal</i>		
<i>Second Seal</i>		
<i>Third Seal</i>		
<i>Fourth Seal</i>		

The events that John sees and the four horsemen have, throughout the years, been given names: conquest, war, famine and death. Biblical scholars have edited these names and have identified the four horsemen as conquest, strife and conflict, economic difficulty and inequality, and death. Once again, we're thrown back on the same question that we've asked before in Revelation and that we'll continue to ask as we read on: *when?* When is the time that John is describing? Is there a coming day when the world will experience these things? Or is John saying something else?

As you ponder this question and what the Bible is telling us, here's an experiment. Read the following description of the ongoing conflict in Yemen as described by the non-profit organization Human Rights Watch:

"The armed conflict in Yemen has resulted in the largest humanitarian crisis in the world; parties to the conflict have killed and injured thousands of Yemeni civilians. According to the Yemen Data Project, more than 17,500 civilians were killed and injured since 2015, and a quarter of all civilians killed in air raids were women and children. More than 20 million people in Yemen are experiencing food insecurity; 10 million of them are at risk of famine.

Since March 2015, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have led a coalition of states in Yemen against Houthi forces that, in alliance with former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, took over Yemen's capital, Sanaa, in September 2014.

Over the past year, these alliances have fractured. Houthi forces, which still control much of northern and central Yemen, killed Saleh after clashes in December 2017. In southern Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have backed rival Yemeni groups—the Saudi-supported Yemeni government led by President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi and the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC).

In August 2019, clashes occurred between Yemeni government and STC forces, with the UAE carrying out airstrikes in support of the STC. Across the country, civilians suffer from a lack of basic services, a spiraling economic crisis, abusive local security forces, and broken governance, health, education, and judicial systems.

Yemen's economy, already fragile prior to the conflict, has been gravely affected. Hundreds of thousands of families no longer have a steady source of income, and many public servants have not received a regular salary in several years. The country's broken economy has worsened the humanitarian crisis."

Is John describing something that is to come, or instead something that we are experiencing now? As we read the above description of current events, it would suggest that we don't need to expect a day to come.

But that's not to say that our days are unique. Imagine living in the fourteenth century and experiencing the Hundred Years' War between England and France, the Black Plague pandemic, and even the Papal Schism, when three different people (!) all had active claims to be the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church and were leading various factions. It would have felt a lot like living in the world described by Revelation 6. Or imagine hearing the news in 410 A.D. that Rome, the capital of the greatest empire that the world had ever known, had been sacked after years of conflict, famine and war; Also a time not too different from Revelation 6! In fact, it would be difficult to find a time in human history where people haven't lived through conflict, famine, and war.

Remember that John is still in the throne room when he sees these things taking place. Recall your work from last week: when John went up into heaven (or "the heavenly places" as Paul calls them in Ephesians), what kind of perspective is he getting? What is the benefit of a heavenly perspective when things are hard?

The seals that are opened are leading to bad things. Look back to Revelation 5. Who is the one who is opening the seals? What do you think is the difference between *opening* the seals - and '*permitting*' (6:4) things to happen - as opposed to *sending* the things (conquest, war, famine, and death) to happen?

Now imagine yourself to be one of the first readers of this book in the closing years of the first century A.D. As soon as you became a Christian, you began to know conflict. It wasn't long ago when, under the Emperor Nero, some members of the church you're a part of lost their lives for believing that Jesus is Lord and for putting their trust in him. You experience famine and you see economic inequality play out in your city and hear about it throughout the Roman Empire. You believe that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, but your experience of the world has been difficult. Then you read Revelation 6 and discover that the Jesus

who you believe “loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” is in a mysterious way in control of those events. How would that make you feel?

Now translate this into your own experience here and now. You read the news just like everyone else does. You’ve experienced hardship in your own ways over the past weeks and months (not least the “pestilence” of COVID-19... see Revelation 6:8). What does it mean to you to know that those events are not out of control or a part of some Armageddon-type experience, but under the control of the Lamb who was slain?

PERSONAL STUDY PART II: TWO SEALS & TWO EXPERIENCES

As we continue on in Revelation 6, we move from the first four seals and the four horsemen to the next two seals (there's a seventh seal coming, but we won't cover it until next week at the beginning of Revelation 8). When these two seals are opened we meet two different kinds of people who have two very different experiences of the opening of the seals.

Revelation 6 now transitions to the experience of followers of Jesus as the events of the first four seals unfold. These are men and women who have been faithful to Jesus throughout their lives and yet they have died. In giving us this picture of the people of God, what does it tell us we might expect as followers of Jesus? Do you find that expectation comforting given what you have experienced? Or do you find it distressing?

Read Revelation 6:9-11 again. We read that the men and women who died for their faith are located "under the altar." In the Old Testament the altar was the place where God met with humanity and revealed his presence. What does that tell us about the kind of access and peace that these followers of Jesus know and experience?

Look at the prayer that these men and women pray in 6:10. What does each part of their prayer tell us about what they believe about the God they now see and know face to face?

"O Sovereign Lord":

"Holy and True":

"You will judge and avenge":

These men and women who are under the altar have experienced suffering and pain, even to the point of death. What does it say about them that their reaction is prayer to God - a God who is sovereign, holy and true? They speak of judgment and justice for what they experienced. What does it mean that they voice this experience in prayer to God and leave that justice in his hands?

In Revelation 6:10, the souls under the altar cry out "how long?" It's an echo of another place in the Bible: Psalm 13:1. Psalm 13 is one of the most famous psalms of lament in the Bible. In a psalm of lament we cry out to God to help us when we feel alone, abandoned or hurt. By some counts over half of the psalms are cries of lament. What do you think that says about what we might expect the normal Christian life to contain - not entirely, but certainly at times and for seasons?

Now read Revelation 6:12-17. The images here are dark and perhaps disturbing. Like so many other places in Revelation, we find lots of images and language that only make sense in the context of the rest of the Bible. In the Old Testament we find these pictures - earthquakes, a blackened sun, and more - used figuratively to describe God's judgment against evil as a part of the "day of the Lord." As an example of this language, read Isaiah 34:1-6. As you read this, how does it make you feel? Why do you think a good God - a God who comes to us as "the lamb who was slain" - would act in this way?

While the first four seals are a series that describe the realities of life after the fall and before Jesus' return, fifth and sixth seals are opposites of one another. They describe two different kinds of people. In the fifth seal, we find people who long for Jesus to return to make right all that's gone wrong in our world and to bring justice where there is injustice. In the sixth seal, we find people who are afraid of Jesus' return. Why do you think they would be afraid of the coming of the Lamb?

Read the following quote from the book *Exclusion and Embrace*. It's written by Miroslav Volf, a Croatian Christian who wrote to reflect on what Christianity had to say about his homeland and the Yugoslav Wars, which were marked by ethnic and religious genocide. Here is what he says:

Should not a loving God be patient and keep luring the perpetrator into goodness? That is exactly what God does: God suffers the evildoers through history as God has suffered them on the cross. But how patient should God be? The day of reckoning must come, not because

God is too eager to pull the trigger, but because every day of patience in a world of violence means more violence and every postponement of vindication means letting insult accompany injury. "How long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood," cry out the souls under the altar to the Sovereign Lord (Rev 6:10). We are uncomfortable with the response that calls the souls "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" (6:11). But the response underlines that God's patience is costly, not so much for God, but above all for the innocent sufferers. Waiting for the evildoers to reform means letting suffering to continue.

Reading these words, can you imagine how those suffering Christians who first heard Revelation would have understood it?

Can you imagine how this imagery - as dark and frightening as it might initially sound - might be good news for those who suffer?

GROUP DISCUSSION

There is no skirting the fact that images described in Revelation 6 are not ones that we naturally welcome with open arms. Spend some time talking about how you felt as you read about each of these seals being opened.

If the four horsemen of Revelation 6 are less about future doom and more about a way to understand our current experience, how might this chapter help us in what we are facing right now?

Look back at the opening of the 5th seal. What do you think about the answer given to the martyrs that they will need to wait a little longer, meaning that their suffering is not over yet and that more suffering for other believers is still to come?

The 6th seal describes a group of people who long to hide themselves from the coming of the Lamb. For this group, rather than being safely in His presence at the altar, they know His coming wrath means their destruction. Does seeing this image move your heart in any ways to help advance the Gospel such that more people might come to know the salvation of the Lord?

WEEK FIVE

THE SEALING OF THE SERVANTS OF GOD

There is no doubt that by this point in our study, we may feel as though our hearts are pounding and our strength feels fleeting. Revelation 6 just took us through a series of seals that seemed to grow in intensity. Perhaps more than any other passage of the bible, this chapter has accurately depicted the reality of the world around us. Evil seems to be strong and looks as though it will conquer. Violence and war tear through the world. Inequality is heartbreaking as we see the rich prosper while the poor get poorer. Death, famines and pestilence take out a portion of earth. Even the followers of God are not spared trouble in this life as we see the lives of the martyrs poured out unto death for the sake of the Gospel. By the time we reach the sixth seal, things have ratcheted to cosmic proportions. As the stars fall down, all the mountains crumble and the sky itself vanishes it seems that all hope is lost. The final sound we hear from chapter 6 is a question, "Who can stand?" And just when it seems that no one will be able to emerge from this certain destruction we get to read the vision given to John in Revelation 7.

Begin by asking God to open your eyes and heart through the Holy Spirit. Then, read Revelation 7:1-8:5 slowly three times. As you do, use a pen or pencil to mark anything that is noteworthy to you: what you see and what you hear, repeated words and phrases, specific attributes of God or particular phrases or concepts that are puzzling.

REVELATION 7:1-8:5 (ESV)

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. 2 Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, 3 saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." 4 And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

5 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed,
12,000 from the tribe of Reuben,
12,000 from the tribe of Gad,
6 12,000 from the tribe of Asher,
12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali,
12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,
7 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon,
12,000 from the tribe of Levi,
12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,
8 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun,
12,000 from the tribe of Joseph,
12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

A Great Multitude from Every Nation

9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" 14 I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

15 "Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.
16 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.
17 For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The Seventh Seal and the Golden Censer

8 When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. 2 Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. 3 And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, 4 and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. 5 Then 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,[a] flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

PERSONAL STUDY PART I: THOSE WHO ARE SEALED

The movie *Titanic* was a box office smash. It was told via the film making technique of a flashback, through the memories of an elderly Rose, as she remembered back to that ill-fated voyage. Movies done in flashback technique provide all the unseen layers for the audience so they might fully understand the depth of the situation for the characters involved.

In a similar way, we might describe chapter 7 of Revelation as a flashback – a vision that helps peel back the layers in order that the reader can answer the question of Revelation 6, “Who can stand?”

Go back and read Rev 6:12-17. How much of the earth and cosmos is affected?

Now read Rev 7:1-3. What part of the earth is allowed to be affected before the servants of God are sealed?

Did you notice that at the beginning of Revelation 7 there is a command given to not harm *anything* upon the earth until the servants of God have been sealed? We almost read with breath held as every corner of the earth is restrained until God has sealed his servants. Something big is coming, but it is held under the power of the Lord, and it cannot be unleashed until his beloved ones are securely under his protection.

So how are we to understand the timing of these visions when the beginning words of Revelation 7 read “After this I saw...?” We are so accustomed to reading the bible as a narrative, where one event chronologically follows another. Yet, Revelation has been calling us to another pattern. It is often one of first hearing and then later seeing. The “hearing” proclaims the message, but the “seeing” offers the fuller meaning and explanation.

Look back at Revelation 5:5. Who does John “hear” will be the one worthy to open the scroll?

After this, John turns to “see” what this worthy one will look like. What does he see?

The seeing is a surprise. The One who is worthy to open the seal is not a strong roaring lion, but instead a sacrificed lamb. The seeing provides understanding that Jesus is worthy to unfold history and give it its awaited purpose all because of his sacrifice.

Thus, we follow a similar pattern here. As everyone upon the earth experiences the destruction of the cosmos what John hears is a natural question: “Who can stand?” The hearing requires a greater seeing so that John (and we) can answer that question. Therefore, the vision of the sealed servants of God is provided after the cries of the people in the sixth seal, but the timing of the actual sealing event being described has already occurred. We know this because every destructive force is held back at the beginning of chapter 7. However, chapter 6 had described the unleashing of every destructive cosmic force. There would be nothing to hold back in chapter 7 if everything had already been destroyed. So, this becomes one of those places in Revelation that demonstrate progressive visions don’t necessarily take us through chronologic time. Rather, the visions are given to John, and to us, in ways that continue to develop our understanding of what God has been up to in salvation history. And what God has been up to with the sealing of his servants is very good news indeed!

Now that we’ve addressed the timing of this vision, we must answer the question of who are the ones sealed? Names and numbers in the book of Revelation catch our attention and make us wonder if these are meant to be understood in a literal or symbolic sense.

According to Rev 7:4, what number of people does John hear are sealed?

The number sealed are from every tribe of the sons of Israel. List out the names of the tribes who are sealed in Rev 7:5-8.

Now flip back to the Old Testament to Genesis 49. In this chapter Jacob blesses his twelve sons, who will become the twelve tribes of Israel. Write out the names of the twelve sons(tribes) in the order they appear:

Now compare your list from Revelation 7 with the list from Genesis 49. What is similar? What is different?

The twelve tribes would have been understood and expected to be those of Genesis 49. So when John uses a number of magnitude like 144,000 (12x12x1000) it tells us that the number is symbolic and points to a grand fullness and completeness. When that number is combined with a people group presented in a particular order, then we also know that deeper meaning is being offered. Rather than the eldest son Reuben being at the start of these 144,000 it is Judah.

Look back at Revelation 5:5. From which tribe is the One worthy to open the seals?

John hears that the ones who are sealed are a large and complete number, being led by the tribe of Judah. Thus, the Lamb's sacrificial offering that has made him worthy to open seals has also brought about the sealing and protection of his chosen people Israel. And "Israel" is not exactly as was expected. The list is not the traditional one of ethnic Israel, rather it includes a son of Joseph who was born to him in Egypt. A little strange, at first, would be the hearing that the "sons of Israel" includes a son from Egypt.

But this fuller picture of the true Israel is not unique. Elsewhere in Scripture God has been pointing to his plan from the beginning that he intended for his people Israel to become the means by which all the nations would come to know him.

Read Genesis 12:1-3 and Galatians 3:7. What was the original promise to Abraham (the father of Israel)? Who are the sons of Abraham (the true Israel)?

John's hearing concludes with this magnificent number – 12 times 12 times 1000 of the tribes of Israel that will include both Jews and Gentiles (sons from Egypt). Next we will turn our attention to what John gets to see...a great multitude from every nation!

PERSONAL STUDY PART II: EVERY TRIBE, PEOPLE & LANGUAGE

Revelation 7:1-8 has contained the first scene about who has been sealed. From God's vantage point, it is the full number of "Israel." Now, in Revelation 7:9-17, John will be granted the seeing of a second scene: the effect this sealing has on all of God's servants.

Re-read Revelation 7:9-17 and take note of who is there, how they got there, and what they are experiencing.

Who Is There?

We've already seen the pattern whereby the hearing of God's message is understood better through seeing. John hears about a number of sealed servants that clearly God knows and God can count, but when he turns to look, it is a multitude so large that no person could number the total.

Look back at Revelation 5:9-10. Why was the Lamb worthy?

According to Rev 7:9 who is now seen before the throne?

Now think back to the turmoil and terror we read about from Revelation 6. The four horsemen depict the division, war, inequality, prejudice, and strife that we experience even now around the world, in our country, in the midst of our city and even within our own hearts. As these seals are opened the resounding shout is "Come!" Chapter 7 of Revelation allows John and us to see what happens to people groups from every corner of the earth as a result of Jesus' coming.

Who does the Lamb desire to be with him? Does this make you long for anything personally and in our country in regards to the fullness of the people of God?

Finally, let's think back to that cry of anguish at the end of chapter 6, "Who can stand?" Take a moment and re-read Revelation 7:9. What are the people before the throne doing?

Did you notice that the great multitude of people surrounding the Lamb are *standing*. Not only are they standing, but they are wearing those white robes handed to them at the altar in chapter 6. And no longer do they cry out and wonder when the Lord will return. Now they cry out in unending praise, for they have experienced their full salvation. Every promise made by the Lord, that at moments seemed threatened throughout history, is now experienced as forever true.

How Did They Get There?

It is of great importance that we consider how the servants of God end up before the throne and the Lamb. For many of us, we hope that all the suffering and pain that we read about in chapter 6 will somehow miss us. Like many of the churches written to in chapters 2 and 3, we long for promises that the Church can stay prosperous, protected and comfortable. Yet this is not the description of how the servants of God end up before the throne.

According to Revelation 7:14, who are these people and how did they get here?

The elder identifies these individuals as the "coming out ones." They are not the ones who once came out or one day will come, rather it is an active present description. They are all the ones from the day John was writing this, to us presently, and to all those after us until Jesus comes again.

And what are they currently coming out of? Tribulation. In fact, it is the phrase *thlipseos megales* or great pressure. Now we can see the power the sealing had from the previous scene. It's not that our sealing keeps any of the worldly ills from befalling us, but rather it gives us all that we need to persevere through the great pressure that we will surely experience.

The language of being the “ones coming out” rather than the “ones being spared” tribulation is of great importance. It is also noteworthy that the servants of God are able to come out instead of being crushed by any of the events of tribulation. How would this image of the “coming out ones” have strengthened John’s audience?

What Are They Experiencing?

Those who had suffered for Christ had been crying out for His return in Revelation 6:9-11. Now they receive the long awaited for promises of his kingdom.

Read verses 15-17. What are believers experiencing as benefits of being washed clean by the blood of the Lamb? Be specific and write each promise.

Much of these verses remind us of previous promises from the Old Testament. Go back and read these passages. Take note of how each one finds its fulfillment after Christ’s second coming.

Psalm 23

Psalm 91

Isaiah 49:8-13

The beauty and strength of Revelation 7 has come between the opening of the sixth and the seventh seal. Since we’ve already discussed that it is not there in terms of *when* it happened, then perhaps its positioning might have more to do with purpose.

Why might John, his original audience, and we need a vision of those sealed in Christ in the middle of the breaking of the seals of the scroll of history?

We will close our study this week with the magnificent pause that opens Revelation 8.

Re-read Revelation 8:1-5

Verse 1 tells us that in the unfolding of this heavenly drama, everything is silent for half an hour. Perhaps up until this point you've hardly been able to catch your breath as there have been majestic visions of the Son of Man, glorious thrones, creatures at every turn, followed by wave after wave of downward destruction. Then just as we can hardly take anymore, we see the Church – sealed and kept throughout it all so that none are lost and safely come through. And as all of heaven grows silent, a smoke rises up before God.

What is rising up in the presence of God?

What a profound and amazing mystery is being unfolded before John's eyes and ours. There will be much heartache and trouble that will press upon this world. First, the church is encouraged in Revelation 4 and 5 not to lose hope as they experience pain, for the Lamb is still on the throne. Second, the church is reminded in chapter 7 that our end is held safe, for we have been sealed by this very One who is seated on the throne. And finally, the church can cry out to the Lord in the midst of the pressure we feel as we await his coming. In the mystery of God, our prayers rise before Him and become a part of accomplishing the fulfillment of His Kingdom.

What a privilege that the One who seals us and keeps us also longs to hear from us. As you close your study this week consider the comforts the Lord has offered in His Word. Take time to thank Him for His merciful seal on your life. Praise Him for the beautiful gift of heaven that He keeps for you. Cry out about all the places that you are still caught in the crunch between this current life and the life that is to come when He returns.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Think back to last week's study of chapter 6 and the breaking of the seals. Now consider that not one of those seals can be permitted until first the servants of God are sealed. How does that affect any current pressures or suffering that you might be experiencing?

The image of the multitude around the throne is a full and diverse one. Yet our present experience on earth seems more to mirror the strife and division from Revelation 6. How has the Lord been stirring in you this week as you consider who he loves, seals and longs to be near?

This week we spent time rejoicing over the promises offered to believers in Revelation 7:15-17. Was there a particular promise that ministered to you?

Chapter 8 begins with the prayers of the saints rising before God. How do you typically think of prayer? Did anything from this vision affect how you will pray in the future?