

Session 4: Binding Evil to His Purposes

Questions to begin

- What is the most surprising letter (or other message) you have ever received?
- What kind of mail do you like to receive?
 - Letters from family and friends.
 - Postcards from people visiting exotic places.
 - Invitations to parties or social events.
 - Funny greetings cards.
 - Cards or letters of encouragement or friendship.
 - Fund-raising appeals.
 - Advertising.
 - Bills.
 - E-mails.

The Reading: Rev 6:1 – 8:1

6 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!’² I 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.

3 When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, ‘Come!’⁴ and 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.

5 When 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,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 day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!’

7 When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, ‘Come!’⁸ I 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.

9 When 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.

12 When 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?’

7After 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.’

4 and I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and 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.

9 After 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 worshipped God, ¹²singing,

‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
 and thanksgiving and honour
 and power and might
 be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.’

13 Then 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.

15 For 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.

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

17 for the Lamb at the centre 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.’

8When the Lamb opened the seventh seal there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

After reading the text, you may wish to consider the following:

- The visions following the first four seals form a group. What do these visions have in common?
- Would a quart of wheat feed a family for a day (6:6)? What kind of economic circumstances are suggested by the price of grains here?
- What contrasts can you find between the visions that follow the breaking of the fifth and sixth seals?
- What picture of Jesus does this reading convey? How might this portrayal of Jesus fit together with the portrayals in Rev 1 and Rev 5?

- What message do you think John was trying to bring to his readers through these visions?
- Can you name some recent martyrs? What constitutes martyrdom? On the basis of the Book of Revelation can you discern the outlines of a theology of martyrdom?

After session 4, you may wish to consider the following

Questions for Application

- When have painful circumstances that were not your fault been an opportunity for you to experience God's presence and support?
- When have you gone through pain in the process of caring for someone? Did you learn something from that experience?
- How might this reading affect your understanding of the petitions of the Our Father: "our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"?
- Are you a little afraid of God? How would you describe your fear? What is the reason for it? Is it a healthy awe of God's greatness?

Suggestions for Prayer

Think of a major disaster that has been in the news of late. Then pray the following prayer:

Lord of all,
 your majesty and authority are great beyond our comprehension;
 equally beyond our understanding is the depth of your compassion and mercy.
 Lord, come to the aid of those who are enduring grief and loss.
 Do not let the downtrodden be crushed,
 but let the poor and needy praise your name.
 Use even sin and sorrow to accomplish good;
 put your grace in the midst of suffering.
 Guide us in showing your compassion.