Opening of the First Six Seals

Revelation 6:1-7:17

Key Verse: 7:17 “For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

In Revelation 2-3 we learned Christ’s messages to the seven churches. We had a glimpse of God’s divine judgement on this earth, especially in the seven churches. In chapters 4-5 we saw the heavenly worship and heard the heavenly choir through the vision of the throne and the vision of the scroll and of the Lamb.

Last week we studied the Lamb who was slain. The Lamb is worthy to open the scroll and to break the seven seals because he was slain, and by his blood God purchased his people from all nations and made them kingdoms and priests. In today’s passage the Lamb breaks the seven seals. Each seal reveals each different judgment on this earth. We call this period of God’s judgment ‘Seven Years’ Tribulation.’ Bible scholars say that the seven years’ tribulation would occur right after Christian churches’ rapture. (7:14) So you don’t have to worry about all these horrible judgments because we believe that we will have been taken into heaven before this tribulation. Let’s see what happened when the Lamb opened the seven seals.

1. The Six seals (6:1-17)

The First seal. Look at verses 1-2. “***I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest***.” As I mentioned last week, the scroll contains God’s secret for the future, especially God’s divine judgment on this earth. When the Lamb of God Jesus opened the first seal, a white horse appeared, whose rider holds a bow and a crown. He looked like a conqueror. People might have thought that the rider was Jesus because it is said that Jesus would come riding on a white horse with a crown. This really happens, but not yet. Jesus comes riding on a white horse in 19:11. Then who is the rider who rides on a white horse in 6:2? We believe that he is an Anti-Christ. He is a false Messiah and fake leader. Bow is known as the symbol of peace. His crown is not the crown for the Messiah. His crown is an athlete’s crown (*stephanos*), not a royal crown (*diadema*), which Jesus wears. Do you remember what Jesus warned about the signs of the end of the age in the synoptic gospels? In Matthew 24:4-5 Jesus warned the appearance of false messiah who will deceive many believers. These days the word ‘populism’ is familiar. People desire powerful leaders who can provide security and safety for them. This causes the appearance of strong and powerful leaders. There are many anti-Christs among powerful leaders today. They disguise themselves with peace and prosperity, but they mislead their people in destruction and death.

The Second seal. Look at verses 3-4. “***When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword.***” When the Lamb opened the second seal, a fiery red horse appeared. The color red is the symbol of terror and blood-shed. Indeed, the rider has power to kill people with his large sword. This fiery red horse indicates persecution and bloody slaughter against believers. In fact, during the period of Roman Emperor Domitian, many Christians who had denied the emperor worship, were slaughtered by swords or thrown into the den of lions.

The third seal. Look at verses 5-6. “***When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature says, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying “Two pounds of wheat for a day’s wages, and six pounds of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine***!” The third horseman is famine and poverty. The color black is used for negative economic term such as Black Monday, Black Friday, and black market, and so on. The words “*Two pounds of wheat for a day’s wages, and six pounds of barley for a days’ wages*” indicate a severe inflation and famine condition. In modern terms a loaf of bread is sold by $200. These days Venezuela suffers in this way. The words “*do not damage the oil and the wine!*” means to request incomplete destruction for the following judgment. Oil and wine are more expensive food than wheat and barley. They are asked to be preserved for the following judgment.

The fourth seal. Look at verses 7-8. “***When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine, and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.”***  When the fourth seal was opened, a pale horse appeared with its rider whose name was Death. This pale horse symbolizes death from plagues and diseases like COVID-19. The word ‘pale’ in Greek is *chloros*, which means greenish. This pale horse implies the death from plagues and diseases. The death toll in USA from COVID-19 already passed 400,000, more casualty than combined the World War I and II. Globally more than 2 million people have died of this disease. The variant of the virus brings more challenges to humans. As I mentioned in chapter 4, during the Spanish Flu in 20th century almost 50 million people died around the world. Still the power of the virus is rampant and threats our life today.

The fifth seal. Look at verses 9-12. “***When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.***” When the Lamb opened the fifth seal, another horse didn’t come up, but the souls of those who were slain because of God’s word and their testimonies. Here, souls are interpreted as persons. They were martyrs who were slain for the name of Jesus. They called out in a loud voice for God’s vindication for their death. They pleaded for God’s avenge on the evildoers and justice for this world. They were given white robes, which symbolize victory, and signs of salvation, being cleansed by the blood of Jesus. (7:14) They were also asked to wait a little longer until the numbers of the martyrs are fulfilled.

What does this fifth seal mean to us? God is still working for salvation in the middle of great tribulation and he gives final victory to those who overcome. Do you remember Christ’s message to the saints in the church of Sardis? Jesus said in 3:5, “*The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels*.” In 1960s before Mao started the Cultural Revolution there were 3 million Christians in the mainland of China. Then Mao arrested Christians, killed their leaders, and burned their churches. Mao said that there would be no Christianity in China at least for a century. But what happens this day? It is reported that there are more than 30 million Christians in China. I believe that in heaven there are no more Christians dressed in white robes than Chinese Christians. With the same hope we pray for North Korea and Islam world. The blood of the Christians in N Korea and in the Middle East will never be in vain. They will ask God’s vindication for their blood.

The Sixth seal. (12-17) What happened when the Lamb opened the sixth seal? Look at verses 12-14. “***I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place***.” When the sixth seal was broken, universal and natural catastrophe occurred. There was a great earthquake. The damage and impact which the earthquake brings to this world is more than we can imagine. Because of Tsunami in 2004 caused by an earthquake, more than 228,000 people killed around the world. The sun lost its light and the moon turned blood red. The cosmic turmoil continues. There are showers of meteors and asteroids, volcanic explosions around the world. The sky recedes like a scroll being rolled up, and the location of all mountains and islands are shifted. It is too horrible and dreadful for us even to imagine.

How did those who remained on this earth respond to this apocalyptic catastrophe? Look at verse 15-17. “***Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it***?” All people on this earth regardless of their position, nation, and situation, will flee to caves and mountains. The terror and pain are so great that they would rather die by rocks and at mountains than to tolerate the wrath of God. Here we see that there are two kinds of people in the middle of God’s judgment. The first ones are those who are running to God. Those who are running to God are those who repent of their sins and turn to God for their salvation. The others are those who running from God. Those who are running from God are those who try to escape from God’s judgment, but eventually running for destruction.

1. 144,000 sealed and the Great Multitude in White Robes (7:1-17)

Revelation chapter 7 is one of the most beautiful chapters among all, but also most difficult chapter to interpret. In general chapter 7 is known as the first interlude between opening the sixth seal and the seventh seal. In chapter 7 there appear two different groups: the 144,400 sealed and the great multitude in white robes. Who are the 144,4000 sealed? In the past Jehovah’s Witnesses claimed that they are the sealed people, but after over numbering they changed their words. We identify them only through the scripture. After witnessing all the eschatological turmoil from the six seals, John saw the four angels were ready to harm this world by their winds. But one superior angel delayed their plan until they find 144,000 sealed people. Look at 7:3-4. “***Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God***. ***Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,400 from all the tribes of Israel.***” The angels had to wait until 144,000 saints are sealed on their foreheads. This seal symbolizes salvation and protection. This seal is put on their heads by the hand of God. The number is 144,000, which come from 12 tribes of Israel, except from Dan and Ephraim. Why not from Dan and Ephraim? According to Genesis 49:17 when Jacob blessed his children, he prophesied about Dan that anti-Christ would come out of the descendants of Dan. Dan and Ephraim later led his brothers to idol worship. (Judg 18:18, 1Ki 12:29-30, Hos 4:17) So, some Bible scholars identify these 144,000 sealed saints as the Messianic Jews, Jewish Christians today. According to their opinion Jesus is waiting until 144,400 Jews are converted into Christianity. Or we can interpret these people as representative of all martyrs who were slain because they have marks of blood of Jesus.

John saw another group of saints in heaven. Look at verse 9. “***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 before 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***.” When these great multitude in white robes praised the Lord, all the angels and the elders around the throne fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: “***Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen***!” (11-12) Another beautiful and glorious worship occurs in heaven. What a different picture from the terrible, horrible, dreadful tribulation on this earth! While people on this earth from all nations, tribes, languages, are running away from God’s judgment, the people in heaven worship God with praise and thanks. Where do you want to belong to? To the earth or to heaven?

Who are these multitude in white robes? One of the elders asked John, “***These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?***” (13) John answered, “Sir, you know.” And the elder said, “***These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb***.” (14) They are those who were saved from the great tribulation which would happen in chapters 8-18. So, this Revelation was not written according to chronological sequence, but to theme purpose. It is amazing that all those who are washed by the blood of Jesus wear in white robes. Do you prepare this white robe for heaven? Are you washed by the blood of the Lamb?

The elder’s message continues. “***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. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,’ nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water,’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.***” (15-17) The saints in white robes will serve the Lord day and night in the temple. No one or nothing will snatch them away from the presence of God. On this earth they were rejected, persecuted, and slaughtered like the Lamb of God, Jesus. But now in heaven they are comforted, secured, and healed by the love of God’s hand. Never again they will suffer from hunger or poverty. Never again they will suffer because of the name of Jesus. This is because Jesus, the Lamb of God, becomes their shepherd. He will lead them to springs of living water and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. What a great, glorious, and beautiful moment in heaven we will experience! Even though we don’t suffer much like those who are in N Korea or in the Middle East, some of us suffer for the sake of Jesus. Some may weep in sorrow and distress. Others may be discouraged when they are rejected simply because they are Christians. But, someday, when our duty on this earth is over, we will be led by our Shepherd Jesus and will drink springs of living water. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes and put the victor’s crown on our heads. We endure present sufferings because of this living hope. We overcome this world because of this glorious hope in heaven. Remember that our present sufferings are not worth compared to the glory which will be revealed in future. Let us endure hardship as discipline to share God’s holiness! Amen.