

Revelation 6-7 The Course of History
Tim Anderson 2/8/20

In September 1995, I went up to Boyne Island off the coast of Gladstone in Queensland for an assessment centre. The assessment centre lasted for three days.

There would have been 30 odd final year Uni Students and over the three days, we did all manner of tasks- individual tasks, group tasks, academic tasks, physical challenges, interviews.

And at each step along the way, we were being watched by the recruitment people at Comalco Smelting. There were a few graduate jobs being offered – and as we looked around, the question on everyone’s mind was, “Who will stand?”

Who is going to make it through to the end without tripping up?

Life is a bit like an assessment centre.

“Who will stand?”

Who is going to make it through to the end without tripping up?

Revelation 6 is a bit like an assessment centre.

As the seals are opened and terrifying calamities are unleashed, in 6:15,

the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich the mighty, and every slave and free man cried out,

That is, all of the inhabitants of the earth including all the powerful people too

because worldly power was no protection, they all cried out,

“Who can stand?”

Who can protect us from the lamb?

On the Comalco assessment centre,
the different tasks were unwrapped one by one.
We didn't find out what the next task was
until we finished the previous one.
Here, Jesus opens the seals one by one.
As each seal is opened,
there's a new challenge for survival
unleashed on the earth's inhabitants.
And for those who survive,
there is the peace and tranquillity,
the joy and love of Chapter 7.

Last week in chapter 5, we read about John weeping and weeping,
because no one was found who could open the seven seals of the scroll.
And then he is told about the lion of the tribe of Judah,
and he looks around and sees a slaughtered lamb,
and everyone worships the lamb
because he and only he can open the seals of the scroll,
The lion who looks like a lamb,
the Lord Jesus,
is worthy to open the seals of the book of destiny,
that conceal God's plans for the future of the world.

But as we read on in chapter six,
we begin to wonder,
what was all the celebration for?
Aren't some seals better left unopened?
As the lamb opens these seals,
there's murder and mayhem,
famine and pestilence.
There is no cause for celebration here!
So what's been going on?

I've watched Cherida give birth 5 times.
And every time the old Jewish prayer is not far from my lips.

“I thank you, God, that I am a man.”
 Giving birth is a very painful experience.
 And it’s a dangerous experience.
 I’m sure I’ve told you about Anna,
 a friend we studied with at Ridley college
 who died having her first child.
 So why is there great celebration when some falls pregnant?
 It’s because of the baby, of course!
 And unfortunately,
 you can’t get a baby from the stork.
 You have to go through the pain of giving birth.

Why does John want the scroll opened?
 Because he wants to get from chapter 5 to chapter 7.
 He wants to get to the point
 where all God’s people are gathered around the throne.
 Unfortunately,
 the only way from chapter 5 to chapter 7 is through chapter 6.
 To get to the new creation.
 To be gathered around the throne of God,
 you have to go through the assessment centre.
 You have to open the seals.

Let’s look at the seals.
 The first seal reveals a rider on a white horse.
 He represents war and conquest.
 It's looking ominous between the US and China right now.
 The second seal reveals a rider on a red horse.
 He represents civil strife.
 The sort of thing that a pandemic can unleash on the world.
 Protestors looting, a breakdown of law and order.
 The third seal reveals a rider on a black horse.
 He represents famine.
 The sort of thing happening in Africa right now.
 Between the locusts and coronavirus,

there are many facing starvation.
The fourth seal reveals a rider on a pale green horse.
He represents death.
The grim reaper who follows the other horsemen,
looking for a harvest.
These are the famed four horsemen of the apocalypse.
And that is the world we live in.
We would make a mistake
if we tried to link the different seals to different periods of history,
or to different historical events.
As if there were only one thing they point to.
The different horses with their destructive riders appear at various times
in history.
And at various places around the world.
They often appear roughly in the order John saw them in his vision.
You get the picture
if you think about the nation of East Timor just to our north west.

A couple of decades back,
they had something like a declaration of independence from Indonesia.
That's the white horse.
And it looks hopeful at the time.
We shouldn't miss the symbolism.
Later in Revelation,
Jesus is pictured as a warrior riding a white horse.
Someone riding a white horse should be good!
The white horse called conquest often has a noble aim.
But he is a counterfeit.
He leads to trouble.
For East Timor, after the declaration of independence came a period of
civil strife.
Militias from West Timor,
upset by the assertion of independence,
came through on an indiscriminate killing spree.
There was mob violence,

and a complete breakdown of law and order.
That's the red horse.
Then the UN and in particular the Australian Army
came in and imposed order.
The militias returned to West Timor and largely disbanded.
But for the citizens of East Timor there was another problem.
Famine.
Civil unrest had driven out all the businesses.
Farming had all but stopped.
And the people were starving.
That's the black horse.
And through it all,
hundreds of thousands of people died.
That's the pale green horse.
And that's the world we live in.
Things have improved greatly in East Timor since then.
But that doesn't mean the four horsemen have disappeared.
They've just gone elsewhere.

Apart from the fact
that we don't have any desire to meet one of those horsemen,
there is another troubling aspect to this vision.
It's the lamb –
that is, it's the Lord Jesus who is sending the horsemen on their way.
He is the one opening the seals.
We don't like to think of it like this,
but Jesus is Lord of everything.
And everything includes war, civil strife, famine and death.
Why does Jesus bring such trials on the earth?
There are two reasons.
For us the trials are to purify us, his people, the church.
To test whether our faith is strong enough to last the distance.
But for the world that doesn't follow Jesus,
the trials are for their judgement.
There's no nice way to say this.

This world is an assessment centre.
And like the Comalco assessment centre,
not everyone gets through at the end.
Indeed, only a small proportion gets through.
Many will fail the assessment centre.
Their cry will be the cry of 6:16,
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.”
That is,
“I’d rather be buried under a mountain
than face God or the Lord Jesus.”

Do we recognise that it’s that serious?
We believe that Jesus is coming to judge.
We believe that many folk we know will not stand on the day of
judgement.
But often we don’t act like it’s urgent.
We say we believe it,
but we don’t act like it’s true.

Do you understand that if you invite a non Christian friend
to join us in our Zoom church service,
you aren’t just giving them
an opportunity to meet a lovely group of people,
you are putting them in a place
where they may just get a metaphorical seal put on their forehead
that will protect them on the day of judgement?
Our Zoom church services might seem entirely unremarkable.
The music and the video are amateur.
The preacher is trying his best to be faithful to the Bible,
but there are more eloquent preachers around.
But if people are going to come to faith and endure to the end,
they have to start somewhere.
And the place to start is to hear about faith from someone who has faith.

It doesn't need to look remarkable from a human perspective. The remarkable thing is that the Holy Spirit works in people through the proclamation of the Word of God. And that is invisible.

After the terrifying vision of God's judgement in chapter 6, John sees a vision of God's protection of his people in chapter 7. The picture is of four angels standing at the four corners of the world, north, south, east and west.

They are preventing the creation from being destroyed.

The four winds are ready to blow, but for the moment they are being held back, until another angel has finished his work.

The other angel has the job of putting a seal on the forehead of everyone who serves God.

Those seals are the mark

that these people will be kept safe from all assaults of the evil one.

They are marked as God's own.

His treasure.

And he will gather them safely to the new heavens and the new earth.

If chapter 6 has finished with a question,

“Who can stand on the great day of the wrath of him who sits on the throne and the lamb?”

Then chapter 7 gives us the answer.

These people can stand.

The ones who have the seal on their forehead, they can stand.

And there are 144000 of them, 12000 from each tribe.

Now the number has been much misunderstood over the years.

The Jehovah's witnesses for many years claimed

that there would be only 144000 people who go to heaven.

But that misses the point of what sort of writing Revelation is.

The technical name is 'apocalyptic'.

And in apocalyptic there are lots of symbols.

We've already run into a lion and a lamb, seals and a scroll,
horsemen and a throne.

It shouldn't surprise us that the numbers are symbolic too.

12 is a number that symbolises completeness.

So if there are 12000 from each of the 12 tribes,
making 144000,

that means they are all done.

There are none left to be marked.

No one has been missed.

All God's people are sealed.

And it's only when all God's people are sealed
that the angels holding back the four winds will let them blow
and the earth will be no more.

I don't know if you've ever worried about being left behind.

As a three year old, Emdwyn did often.

If we were packing things up ready to go in the car
and she was putting her shoes on or something,
and I took the little ones out and put them in the car,
she'd stop putting her shoes on and come rushing out in her socks.

Don't go without me, Daddy!

Don't go without me.

It doesn't matter how many times

I reassure her that I wouldn't leave without her,
she still had that fear.

Well the reassurance must have worked too well.

These days she takes it for granted
that everyone will wait for her while she gets ready!

When the time comes for the faithful to go to heaven,
everyone who ought to be there will be there.

If you haven't said your prayers that morning,
you won't be left behind.

If you've just had an argument with someone and you haven't made up,
you'll still be coming.

If you put your trust in Jesus but died before you could be baptised,

you'll be there.

If your relatives choose to have your funeral run by a civil celebrant at a funeral parlour, you'll won't be left behind.

(But don't let it happen.

Write it in your will.)

If you skipped church for the three weeks before you died to play bowls, yes, even then you won't miss out.

Everyone who has the seal of the living God on their forehead, every last one will be there.

What will heaven be like when we get there?

That's one of the favourite youth group questions of all time.

Maybe you still wonder.

Will it be any fun playing golf, when you get a hole in one every hole?

Does Lindt chocolate still taste good when you've eaten it every day for a month?

After John sees the angel putting seals on the foreheads of the servants of our God,

he sees a picture of the people in heaven.

It's a countless multitude.

People from every tribe, people, nation and language.

God shows no favouritism.

There's no advantage to having white skin.

There's no advantage to speaking English.

All manner of folk will be there.

Walter was doing some cleaning out during the week.

He found his baptism certificate from the 1960s.

It was complete with a picture of Jesus with lily white skin surrounded by children with lily white skin.

Thankfully we don't give out baptism certificates like that anymore.

There is no favouritism in heaven.

And the average Christian in the world right now is a young woman, with dark skin who lives in Africa or Asia.

Middle aged white men like me
are a tiny minority in the Kingdom of God.

Some things however are true
about all the people in the Kingdom of God.

They are wearing white robes,
holding palm branches,
and singing God's praises.

Now I've had some folk tell me,
that if heaven means spending an eternity dressed up like a choir boy,
singing like a choir boy,
then they'd rather go to the other place.

But those people are missing the point.

The white robes represent purity.

I don't know about you,

but I think I will like myself more,

when all the bad stuff has been taken away
and only the good stuff is left.

The palm branches represent celebration.

And who doesn't like a celebration with good friends.

If feeling starved of the company of friends right now.

But in heaven, we will be with good friends forever.

And the singing of God's praises

will be like being in the company of the person you most like to be with
and talking to them forever.

Heaven will be a place of utter contentment.

7:16-7 says,

"Never again will they hunger,
never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat upon them,
not any scorching heat.

For the lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd;
he will lead them to springs of living water.

And God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

Why wouldn't we want to praise a God
who has such wonderful plans for us?
And a God who looks after us so well.
So let's sing out his praise!
We're too backward in praising him.
We close our mouths if we think someone might possibly be offended.
Let's take a leaf out of the footy supporters' book.
They are not backward in promoting the virtues of their team.
Robbie Boer and Colin Prowd always have some
Western Bulldogs and Carlton merchandise in our Zoom meetings.
We need to be unashamed like them.
Don't close your mouth.
Tell the world "How great is our God!"