

Session #9: Revelation 8:1-

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So we move on in the process of Jesus opening the seven seals. Today's study will focus on the opening of the fifth seal and sixth seal.

Fifth Seal: 6:9-11

For those who see these seven seals within one historic moment there could be a challenge in understanding the imagery in this fifth seal. What must scholars understand in this seal is the accumulation of the souls of the martyrs throughout all of history.

6:9 fifth seal: The Lamb breaks up the *fifth seal* and St. John sees an altar with ***the souls of those who have been slain***. The reason for their death is explained further in the sentence: ***because of the witness(testimony) they bore to the word of God***. These souls are the souls of the martyrs, and as we already know, martyrs are those faith filled Christians who die for the faith. In Greek the you could use *testimony* and *witness* interchangeably. A better translation for the second part of that phrase would be: *they were slain for the word of God*. Scholars suggest this offers a better translation because it equates their death with the death of Christ. As Christ was slain for his unwavering faith and belief in His Father's plan of salvation so to are the martyrs slain for this very same reason. So why are the souls of the martyrs ***underneath the altar***? To show that God accepts their lives as an acceptable offering, their sacrifice as pleasing to Him. To full understand this image we must remember that in the Old Testament and for the first century Jew, the soul of the person (or animal) was found in it's blood. That is the main reason why Jews, even to this day, do not consume the blood of any animal. A kosher meat is one that has been killed humanly and is drained of all its blood. In the Temple the blood of the animal being sacrificed was allowed to drain over and down the altar, sometimes even splashed on the sides to indicate that the life or "soul" of the animal was being offered to God. In this way of thinking if God found the sacrifice pleasing, then God would bestow on the person or family offering it a blessing, whether that be an answer to a prayer, forgiveness of sin or the deliverance from an enemy. The fact that these souls, in St. John's vision, remain beneath the altar speaks to the fact that God has found the sacrifice of their lives both pleasing and acceptable. It is not that the Lord delights in human suffering, far from it; but in the mysterious plan of salvation the work of evil, in the end, brings about the salvation of the world. Just as Jesus relied on the evil acts perpetrated upon Him at His passion and death to bring about the salvation of all, martyrs' deaths participate in that same act.

6:10 They cried out: After acknowledging Jesus as God, ***Sovereign Lord, holy and true***, the souls beneath the altar cry out in ***a loud voice, " , how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood?*** Jesus is their Lord and master and it is right that they would turn to God and ask for justice. These martyrs hold ***the inhabitants of the earth*** responsible.

Who are these *inhabitants of the earth*? While the phrase may sound somewhat neutral to us, St. John uses it nine times in Revelation, always with a negative connotation.

- Will be subject to the coming trial on earth 3:10
- Kill Christians because of their witness 6:10
- Will be struck by the three woes 8:13
- Are tormented by the testimony of the two witness and rejoice in their death 11;10
- Worship the beast 13:8, 12
- Are deceived by the false prophet 13:14
- Drink of the wine of Babylon's immorality 17:2
- Do not have their names written in the book of life 17:8

Who are these *inhabitants of the earth*? It is most likely those who reject God and those who are faithful to His ways. St. John uses the phrase *those who dwell (or will one day dwell) in heaven* to identify Christians 12:12; 13:6).

6:11 Each of them: The reward for their faithfulness is **a white robe**. As we have stated in the past the white is a symbol of their purity before God. The Greek word used translates to mean a robe, a long garment worn by a person of authority or rank. In the bible, the word is often used to describe the apparel of the priests of the Temple and occasionally angels (Ezekiel 10:2, 6, 8). So these individuals, these first century martyrs, as are all martyrs throughout history are recognized in heaven in a special way. The martyrs under the altar are told **to be patient a little while longer**. In the Greek it actually says to *rest or be refreshed until their was filled of their fellow servants and brothers who were going to be killed as they had been*. These martyrs are crying out for justice (not vengeance). God's response is wait until the plan of salvation has been completed, then and only then will all things be set right and the scales of justice will be set right.

Sixth Seal 6:12-17

Most scholars agree that, while the first four seals spoke to the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in the first century, this vision does speak to the what will occur at the end of all time, the end of all history. What St. John sees is a collage of Old Testament prophecies.

6:12 Then I watched: The first thing we hear about in St. John's vision is **a great earthquake**. We can imagine if this is the end of all human history, this earthquake will shake the entire earth. In the bible an earthquake usually signals God's action or intervention. Following the earthquake **the sun will turn black as dark sackcloth**. In our studies of the Old Testament we have seen this moment before in the plaque of darkness against the Egyptians (Ex 10:21-22). Isaiah (13:10-11) also prophesied a "black sky" against the Babylonians. We also find in the Old Testament a similar prophesy from Joel (3:4) also speaking to the **whole moon becoming like blood**.

6:13-14 The stars: The vision goes on to say that the *stars* will fall to the earth and the *sky* will be **divided like a torn scroll curling up**. Once again this recalls the prophecy of Isaiah 34:4, but above all it will recall the words of Jesus Himself speaking to His

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prophecy at the end of all time ((Matt 24:29-31, Mark 13:24-26): *“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 the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.*

Interesting to note, that of all the biblical prophecies only Jesus mentions the stars falling from the sky.

6:15 The kings of the earth: We read earlier that the souls of the martyrs cried out for justice. We see in this vision, this prophecy that at the end of all time God will level His justice on seven class of citizens: kings, ***nobles, military officers, the rich, the powerful and every slave and free person.*** If you have a sense that we have just identified everyone, you would be right. That coupled with the fact that there are *seven* class of citizens, seven symbolizing completeness. The good and the righteous will have been taken into heaven before this moment. Those that remain worship another god and in that have chosen to do evil to God’s people and in that choice will suffer the consequences. You should notice that the people who refuse to repent are those that are wealthy and/or wield power, for the most part.

6:16 They cried out: In their fear of the wrath of God, they would rather die and beg ***the mountains and the rocks to fall on*** them in hopes of becoming hidden from God’s ***face*** and ***the wrath of the Lamb.*** Christ (the Lamb) came once into the world to teach, preach and then to suffer and die for the sins of all humanity and for our salvation. Christ will come again at the end of all time and bring salvation to the faithful and judgement to those who refuse to repent in spit of warnings and witness.

6:17 the great day of their wrath has come: This phrase means the final “day of the Lord (Isaiah 13:9; Joel 2:1) in which the final judgement comes down upon humanity. And with the greatness of God, ***who can withstand?***

As we bring chapter six to a close, scholars suggest that if the interpretation of these six seals is correct then it sheds light on the interpretation of the whole of the Book of Revelation. Rather than to view the book as a series of future events placed in a chronological order, the visionary scenes that speak to those in the first century immediate future (seals one through four), their present moment (seal five) and the far distant future (seal six), portray troubles of not only their time but all time as well. *The calamities that accompany the four horsemen occur in every age and always serve as invitations to conversion. Martyrs, whose shed blood demands requital, will continue to be killed until this age comes to a close. When that day comes, it will arrive with terrifying and irresistible force against all, great or small, who persist in doing evil. Rather than present a timeline in neat chronological order, the book of Revelation instructs its readers by multiple retellings of the final period of human history, focusing on different aspects of the story in each repetition.* Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Revelation, by Peter S. Williamson

Before we open the seventh seal, we take a pause in one direction of St. John's vision and enter into another. We move from Judgement and turn our attention to the Liturgy happening once again in the heavenly realms. In chapter six we reflected on the judgement of the unrighteous, the unrepentant. Now we turn our attention to the faithful and what happens to them. St. John sees what amounts to a before and after. In the first vision (7:1-8) we will study what God did (and continues to do) to protect His people from the coming disasters. In the second vision (7:9-17) we get a preview of what awaits those who remain faithful to God, no matter what the distress. God will shelter His people with His presence and shepherd them to springs of life-giving waters. In chapter seven we are getting a sneak peak into life in heaven that awaits the faithful.

Setting the Seal of the One Hundred and Forty-Four Thousand 7:1-8

7:1 After this I saw: Coming from the conversation in the paragraph above, St. John's statement of *After this I saw* relates to the sequence of his visions; not to the order in which the events would/will occur. St. John sees ***four angels standing at the four corners of the earth***. Once again we are to understand this image as figurative and not literal. The four "corners" represents the four points on a compass. This image is to be understood as meaning that the angels, or God's dominion encompasses the entire earth. This is understood not only in biblical interpretation but in other ancient literature. The angels are ***holding back the four winds***. Scholars suggest that the *holding back of the four winds* found here in Revelation is linked to Zechariah's four horsemen who bring God's judgment (Zech 6:5). The judgment of God leveled against the earth in the Old Testament is now being held back to safeguard the One Hundred and Forty-Four Thousand, the faithful. A judgment that was meant to originally blow and damage the ***land or sea*** and since the earth is either land or sea we are to understand this to also mean, the whole earth.

7:2-3 Then I saw: While the first angels are holding back the judgment of God, a fifth ***angel*** becomes present in St. John's vision. We know that this angel is of great importance because he holds ***the seal of the living God***. We need to take a moment to understand what a seal is used for. Even today we place a "seal", whether it be by creating an impression on a document or some other form of marking this document, this license, this whatever as important or belongs to a specific owner. For centuries a king or high official wore a ring which was the seal of the country or their position and to make a document "official" wax was melted onto the paper and the ring pressed into the was to "seal" the document. Taken to another level, animals were branded with a seal of their owners and unfortunately so were some slaves. In ancient times when a soldier "enlisted" in the Roman army, the name of their commanding general was tattooed on their hand or forearm. All of this was done to identify ownership and in identifying ownership it established who had the rights to and the responsibility for this item, animal or person. The seal the angel carries is the seal of the *living God*. This could be

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understood to mean that God is alive and well but more probably means Jesus, the god who was put to death but rose to new life.

The angel ***cried out in a loud voice to the four angels***. These verses can be a bit confusing because in verse one we read that the angels are ***holding back*** the winds from blowing so as not to damage the land or sea. Yet in verse two we read that these four angels were ***given power to damage the land and the sea***. And now we have the one angel calling out ***“Do not damage the land or the sea...”*** Most scholars suggest it has to do with translating the original text. We are to understand that these four angels have the power and were sent out as part of God’s judgment to destroy the earth, but before they act they are to hold back so that God can identify the faithful and the righteous so that they will not be harmed. And how are these faithful and righteous to be identified? This seal of God will be ***put ... on the foreheads of the servants of our God***. The placing of a seal on the foreheads recalls the vision and command by God to Ezekiel. In Ezekiel’s vision God commanded an angel to mark on the forehead of all the righteous in Israel the Greek letter *tau*. In God’s command in the vision was to protect the righteous as God brought judgment on Jerusalem and those “seal” by God would be saved. (Ezekiel 9:3-6)

We will later in Revelation read that this “seal” will be on the forehead of believers will be the name of God (22:4).

Point of Reflection: Within the Catholic faith every Catholic is “sealed” with a sign of faith in baptism and confirmation when the sign of the cross is traced on their forehead with the holy oils. It is a part of rite in faith to be signed as the “property” of God. We won’t need to wait for the seal. We already have it.

7:4-8 I heard: St. John now hears the number of those who are to receive the seal of the living God – ***one hundred and forty four thousand***. One hundred and forty four thousand is twelve times twelve thousand. For those religions who read the bible literally they have a difficult time with this passage because from the beginning of time those faithful to God in the Old Testament, through Jesus Christ since the first century far exceeds this number. In the Old Testament the number twelve stood for the whole of God’s people – the twelve tribes lead by the twelve patriarchs. Jesus chose twelve apostles to represent the twelve tribes and through these twelve men usher in a new beginning of who is part of God’s children, the faithful. The twelve times twelve thousand here is a way of intensifying the meaning of the number twelve. The number one thousand, besides being a large number, was also the largest military unit under a single commander in the biblical Israel’s army (Numbers 31:14, 48, 52, 54).

While there still remains some biblical scholars who argue for the idea that this number is meant to only identify those first century Jewish Christians, the vast majority of Catholic Scholars agree that what is trying to be explained here or communicated here is that the faithful, regardless of Gentile or Jewish Christian; ALL those faithful to the one true God will find themselves recognized by God as belonging to Him and will be made safe in the face of the final cataclysm that awaits those who choose to reject God at the end of all time.

Prayers Before the Throne 7:9-17

In the section above (7:1-8) what we experienced through St. John's vision was a *flashback* showing that God had placed His seal on His people as a protection before their trials began. What we will see in this section (7:9-17) is a look into the future of what awaits God's faithful after their death.

7:9 After this I looked: And St. John sees **a great multitude** of people. So many people that **that no man could number**. These are the faithful who have passed through the trials and tribulations of their lives without compromising their faith.

7:12 Blessing ... and might: In total there are seven acclamations of praise meaning that God is deserving of all our adoration and praise.

7:14 great tribulation: This goes back to the words of Jesus in Matthew 24.

7:15-17: Therefore they are: What we see here are the unending benefits of heaven.

Picture on Page One: "The Opening of the Fifth and Sixth Seals" Matthais Gerung (1500-1570)

Reflection Questions:

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Baptism: An Indelible Spiritual Mark: 1272-1284

Celebrants of the Heavenly Liturgy: 1136-1139

The Church Perfected in Glory: 769

The Church as the Universal Sacrament of Salvation: 774-778

Feasts of Martyrs and Saints: 1173

Heaven: 1023-1029

Martyrs: To Bear Witness to the Truth: 2471-2474

Signs and Rite of Confirmation: 1293-1296

Bibliography:

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- New Collegeville Bible Commentary: The Book of Revelation by Catherine Cory
- Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: 1st, 2nd, 3rd Letters of St. John and the Revelation to St. John by Scott Hahn & Curtis Mitch
- The Navarre Bible: Revelation
- Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Revelation, by Peter S. Williamson
- Apocalypse Then and Now: A Companion to the Book of Revelation by Roland J Faley
- Agape Bible Study: Revelation by Michal Hunt. Agapebiblestudy.com
- The End: The Book of Revelation, Audio Series by Dr. Scott Hahn
- Revelation: The Kingdom Yet to Come, DVD Series by Ascension Press and Dr. Jeff Cavins

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