

Seven Seals, Seven Trumpets, and Seven Bowls

Introduction / Ron (5 minutes)

Throne Room Scene (chaps. 4-5) / Greg (10 minutes)

- “For the first time in Revelation, the reader is introduced to the frequent interchange between heaven and earth found in the remainder of the book. What happens on earth has its inseparable heavenly counterpart” (Johnson, notes on 4:1).
- The text describes the throne and its surroundings as well as a number of participants in the scene, but there is minimal physical description of God.
 - Verse 2 contains the first of 18 references to God’s throne found in chapters 4 and 5. The throne gives evidence of God’s splendor and is the scene where he receives worship from angelic beings as well as the redeemed.
 - The book of Revelation contains some 40 references to the throne of God or of Christ. Nearly half of those references occur in chapters 4 and 5. Several terms are used to denote the divine throne. The most common is simply “the throne” (e.g., 4:3; 5:1; 6:16; 7:9; 14:3). It is also spoken of as “his [i.e., God’s] throne” (1:4; 3:21; 12:5), “my [i.e., Christ’s] throne” (3:21), “a throne . . . in heaven” (4:2), “the throne of God” (7:15), “a great white throne” (20:11), and “the throne of God and of the Lamb” (22:1; 22:3). The throne is an image of God’s sovereign rule and prerogatives as supreme judge. It is collocated with the heavenly temple (16:17).
 - According to the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, “God’s kingship is affirmed many times in Scripture, and his throne is a visible proof of his sovereign rule. [. . .] References to God’s throne are found most often in the book of Revelation, appropriately enough, since this book describes God’s final victory over Satan and the forces of evil” (Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 869).
- **Twenty-four elders**
 - The identity or referent of these twenty-four elders is a matter of debate. Perhaps the most plausible interpretation is that they are representatives of the New Testament saints.
 - Twelve times Revelation makes reference to twenty-four elders (4:4; 4:10; 5:5; 5:6; 5:8; 5:11; 5:14; 7:11; 7:13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4). Seven of these references are concentrated in the throne room narratives of chapters 4 and 5.
 - The elders sit on thrones in a circle around God’s throne (4:4). They are dressed in white clothing and wear gold crowns (4:4). They are present in the throne room along with the four living creatures. They are distinct from at least some angels (5:2, 4; 5:11; 11:15-16).
 - The elders are aware of Christ’s worthiness (5:4-5) and the identity of those delivered from the great tribulation (7:13ff). They are depicted consistently as worshiping God and the Lamb along with the four living creatures, the angels, and the redeemed of mankind (4:9-11; 5:8ff; 7:9ff; 11:15ff; 19:1ff). They seem to represent the saints by offering their prayers as incense (5:8).

- The view that the elders represent the New Testament saints is supported by contextual cues. The description of the elders’ appearance—“clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads”—seems consistent with the promises extended to the conquerors in Smyrna (2:10), Sardis (3:4-5; cf. 3:18), and Philadelphia (3:11). Johnson argues that since individual elders twice address John (5:5; 7:13), they can hardly be viewed as “a symbolic group representing the church” (notes on 7:13-14). One (admittedly speculative) way to reconcile these facts would be to view the elders as individual believers from the church age selected to sit before the throne of God and the Lamb.
 - Four living creatures
 - Twenty references to four living creatures occur in chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, 14, 15, and 19—each time in a throne room scene. They dwell in the presence of God and the Lamb (4:6; 5:6; 14:3; etc.). Physically, they are described as being full of eyes (4:6; 4:8) and having six wings (4:8). Each one has a distinctive appearance, whether of a lion, an ox, a man’s face, and an eagle in flight (4:7). They are said to be constantly engaged in proclaiming the holiness of God (4:8). Their description is similar to that of the beings described in Isaiah 6:2-3 and Ezekiel 1:5-11.
 - The four living creatures are distinct from the mass of angels who also praise the Lamb (5:11ff; 7:11-12). Along with the twenty-four elders, they bow before the Lamb, singing of the worthiness of his sacrifice (5:8ff). They lead in worship of God and the Lamb, evoking a response from the twenty-four elders and the angels (4:9-10). They affirm humans for their worship of God (19:1-4) and the Lamb (5:13-14). They are present when the 144,000 sing a new song (14:2-3), and they join the throng of the redeemed and the angels in worship of God and the Lamb (7:9-12). While their primary function seems to be worship, they are present for the Lamb’s opening of the seals on the scroll (6:1; 6:3; 6:5-6; 6:7) and aid the angels in carrying out God’s wrath (15:7).
 - Allusion to numerous Old Testament texts—especially Dan. 7; Ezek. 1; Isa. 6
 - [Examine artist’s rendering of scene here]
 - Hymns
 - In chapter 5 the object of praise shifts from the Lamb alone (v. 12) to God and the Lamb combined (v. 13). Praise is not merely the province of a heavenly elite (the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders), as it was earlier in John’s vision, but of masses of angels and humans (vv. 11, 13). Furthermore, the motivation for praise now has a redemptive focus (v. 12; cf. vv. 9-10), as opposed to the creational focus found in the previous chapter (4:11).

Text	Participants	Focus of Worship	Motives for Worship
4:8-11	4 living creatures 24 elders	God	God’s eternal sovereignty God’s creative acts
5:8-14	4 living creatures 24 elders An innumerable group of angels Every created being	The Lamb God	The Lamb’s victory

- **A scroll** with seven seals
 - “The scroll . . . is not only about judgment or about the inheritance of the kingdom. Rather, it contains the announcement of the consummation of all history—how things will ultimately end for all people: judgment for the world and the final reward of the saints (11:18). Christ alone, as the Messiah, is the executor of the purposes of God and the heir of the inheritance of the world. He obtained this by his substitutionary and propitiatory death on the cross (5:9)” (Johnson, notes on 5:1).
 - “As the seals are broken and the roll opened, salvation history unfolds till history culminates in the kingdom reign of the Messiah over the whole earth. History, then has its center in Jesus Christ and its goal in his triumphant reign over all the powers of the world” (Johnson, notes on 5:2-4).
 - “The ‘bowls full of incense’ represent the ‘prayers of the saints’ (8:3-4). . . . Why would John mention the saints on earth as petitioning God? In 6:10 the martyrs are seen as calling to God for his judgment on those who killed them, and in 8:3-4 the prayers of the saints are immediately connected with the trumpets of God’s judgment. These prayers, then, are evidently for God’s vindication of the martyred saints” (Johnson, notes on 5:8).

Seven Seals / Ron (8 mins.)

Seven Trumpets / Greg (8 mins.)

- The altar
 - The altar is a place where incense is burned (8:3). The incense is, or at least bears relation to, “the prayers of [all] the saints” (8:3; cf. 5:8). Oversight of the altar’s fire appears to be the province of angels, or possibly of a single angel (14:18; comp. 8:5). An angel throws fire from the altar to the earth, leading to the display of nature’s fury (8:5).
 - The altar seems to have a special connection with those martyred for their belief in God and Christ. It affirms the fact that they are vindicated through divine judgment (16:5-7). Furthermore, the souls of the (Tribulation?) martyrs are pictured as being under the altar (6:9); indeed, the altar may be a place of rest (6:11).
 - Johnson connects this reference with 6:9 via the image of the altar, concluding that the prayers rising before God are the martyrs’ cries for vindication (notes on 8:3-4).
 - “The point here is that the Lord hears the prayers of his priestly people (cf. Rev. 1:5; 5:10) and answers with devastating judgment” (Beale and McDonough 1111).
 - A voice is said to emanate from the altar area on three occasions: The first case plainly describes the voice as that of the martyrs crying out for justice (6:9-10). This description probably provides the key to interpreting the other two instances of speech proceeding from the altar, which are more cryptic. In the second case, a voice from the altar’s horns calls on an angel to launch the sixth trumpet judgment (9:13).

Finally, the altar is said to speak, affirming God's judgment on those who have slain the saints and prophets (16:5-7).

- Significance of trumpet imagery
 - “Trumpets may serve any number of functions. They might announce a day of remembrance (Lev. 23:24), a triumph (Josh. 6:4), or a coronation (1 Kings 1:34). Most likely, here they represent a warning (e.g., of an invasion from enemy armies)” (Gregg 149).
 - “Shofar trumpets (usually made of a ram's horn) were used in Jewish life as signaling instruments. They sounded alarms for war or danger as well as for peace and announced the new moon, the beginning of the Sabbath, or the death of a notable. Trumpets were also used to throw enemies into panic (Judg 7:19-20). Their use as eschatological signals of the day of the Lord or the return of Christ is well established in the OT and NT (Isa 27:13; Joel 2:1; Zeph 1:16; Matt 24:31; 1Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:16)” (Johnson, notes on 8:6).
 - “Trumpets were obvious signs of warning that battle is near . . . , and thus they might be appropriate symbols of a call to repentance. On the other hand, because the trumpets are generally sounded in holy war, they are equally susceptible to be taken as signs of certain, destructive judgment. This certainly is the case in the fall of Jericho, which forms the primary background for the seven trumpets of Revelation” (Beale and McDonough 1112).
- Seven angels who stand before God receive trumpets and proceed to blow them one at a time.
 - While the scope of the trumpet judgments seems to be worldwide, the devastation is often limited to a third of what it could have been.
 - The first five trumpet judgments are patterned after the plagues of Exodus.
 - The last three trumpets are more calamitous than the first four, being labeled as three woes. [Read 8:6-8 as representative of the first four bowls.]
 - The trumpet judgments have a variety of impacts:
 - The first four target the physical environment.
 - The fifth seems to target only unbelievers, just as some of the Exodus plagues afflicted only the Egyptians.
 - The sixth trumpet entails war on a massive scale.
 - With the blowing of the seventh trumpet the twenty-four elders worship God for the arrival of His kingdom. In other words, they are signaling that the tyranny of Satan, the beast, sin, and death are coming to an end. [Read 11:15-19, noting the

Seven Bowls / Ron (6 mins.)

- [Will conclude with mention of Babylon's fall.]

Conclusion / Greg (3 mins.)

- The three series of sevens—seals, trumpets, and bowls—carry us through a turbulent future period that will culminate in the Second Coming of Christ.
- Our time has only allowed us to introduce these topics in brief fashion. While some of the imagery is hard to understand, there can be no doubt that the judgments described in the chapters we've looked at tonight are horrific. And while we might be tempted to wonder at the harshness of God's wrath, we have to remember that this is God's response to members of a human race who have resisted his merciful overtures and have ultimately organized in rebellion against Him. One of the great themes of Revelation is that God is just, and in His supreme justice He will not continually let unrighteousness go without challenge. With the martyrs, then, we can affirm praise to God for his just judgments.
- What we've covered tonight has necessarily been **selective**. While the seals, trumpets, and bowls provide the basic structure of about half of Revelation, chapters 4 through 16 contain a lot more than lists of plagues. Next week, God willing, we'll cover some of what we've skipped, including what Revelation has to say about the mark of the beast. Incidentally, the mark of the beast isn't the only mark in Revelation; the other mark is actually good, but you'll have to come next week to learn about that.
- In the following weeks, we'll pick up with some other themes that we've hinted at tonight and in previous lessons: the battle of Armageddon, the judgment of Babylon, Christ's thousand-year reign, and more.