

The Story of The Seven Seals | *Who Can Stand?*

Revelation 6:1-8:1

I hope you had a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! Today, as we return to our regularly-scheduled programming, we trade in the *Seven Swans a-Swimming* for *Seven Seals a-Scaring*; the *Four Calling-Birds of Christmas* for the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. If you've just joined us, we're in the middle of a year-long study of the *Book of Revelation*, the Bible's *last* and perhaps *strangest* book, full of bizarre creatures and apocalyptic images that might seem a little out of step with *New Years* vibes. Rather than *hope, optimism, and cheer*, we have *swords, famine, and plagues*! Perhaps the reading already has some of you praying for rocks to fall on you, because you're not sure you can *stand* one more sermon on God's *judgment*. If that's you, don't call on the rocks just yet because, as we saw this fall, despite its strange symbolism and style, Revelation isn't meant to instill fear, but faith; to give us a picture—a *revelation*—of *Jesus*.

Back in November, in chapters 4–5, it was revealed that, in all of heaven, only *Jesus* was found worthy to break the seven seals and open the scroll—a symbol of his authority to direct human destiny—not because of his great power, but because of his self-sacrificing love. Jesus is depicted as a blood-stained, sacrificial lamb, slain to save humanity, a reminder of Jesus' death on the cross. As the Lamb now breaks the seals and opens the scroll, it reveals a nightmarish vision, told using vivid images borrowed from the Old Testament *Book of Zechariah*, where four colourful horses pull chariots to the ends of the earth, carrying a message of peace. Only John reimagines Zechariah's horses as the *Four Riders of Revelation* who, instead of *peace*, tell the all-too-familiar story of human *suffering*, each rider representing the catastrophic effects of *sin*.

The *first* horse is *white*, the kind of horse a king would ride. Its rider, ***“held a bow, and was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.”*** (Rev 6:2) Conquest and

crowns—a familiar image of the many emperors and kings who’ve ruled throughout history by domination, wielding power over the weak. It’s a reminder of the tragic story of Adam & Eve, created as fully-equal *co-rulers* of creation, intended to lead the human project *together*, until sin slithered into the garden, bringing about a new world order. In [Genesis 3:16](#), God laments to Eve that, because of *sin*, **“Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”** This shift from shared *dominion* to mutual *domination*—*the desire to have and hold power over each other*—dominates the pages of Scripture, and our world today—in *politics, business, friendship, marriage, even in the church*. In your life, who do you have power over? Who has power of you? Where does power and control breed inequality and dehumanize us. How has *my-way-or-the-highway* created nothing but dead-end relationships? This is *not* the Way of *Jesus*, who said:

“The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.” ([Matt 20:25-27](#))

The next horse is *red like blood* and is **“given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword.”** ([Rev 6:4](#)) This horse is *violence*—the *sword of war*. The first story of life-after-sin in Genesis is the brutal story of Cain & Abel—one brother violently killing the other; it’s the first in a long line of violent acts recorded in the Bible, repeated throughout history, and reported on daily in the news today. Sin tells us to take what we want by force, but Jesus warns that, **“all who live by the sword will die by the sword.”** ([Matt 26:52](#)) Still, not all violence brandishes *swords*. Some violence takes the form of words, spoken behind backs or typed on a keyboard. Maybe you’ve experienced sexual or psychological violence, racism, or neglect, which is another form of violence we call *ghosting*, or *cancelling*. Unlike sin, *Jesus* came not to *take* peace but *give* it, to die for his enemies, rather than kill them.

The *third* horse John describes is *dark as night*.

"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!'"

Revelation 6:5-6

This horse and rider are *famine*, a classic *anti*-Eden image in the Bible. Once sin removed humans from the garden's abundant provision, God's people wandered deserts and wilderness, stricken with hunger and thirst. Biblically, *famine* is always a reminder of how we've drifted from the garden-ideal. But what John sees is more than just hunger due to scarcity. Imbalanced scales refer to economic injustice, needless poverty caused by greed. In this vision, basic first-century staples like *wheat* and *barley* are priced out of reach for the average person, while *oil* and *wine* is preserved for the wealthy at all cost; a tragic pattern of sin we still see today, from the grocery store to the gas pump, from rising hydro bills to inflated housing prices. It's why Jesus revealed himself as the Divine Gardener, the generous Giver of Abundance, the Bread and Water of Life.

The *fourth* horse is *pale* and **"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."** (Rev 6:8) Combining the first three, the final rider is the hopeless end-result of conquest, violence, and famine: *death*, by disease or animal attack —*a reminder of Christians fed to lions*. Before *sin*, humans knew an eternal quality of *life*, God's Spirit breathing in our lungs. But God warned the path of sin would surely lead to *death*, not just *physical* death—the *decay of our bodies*—but *spiritual* death—the *decay of relationship with God*. The end goal of *sin* is always *death*, separating us from the Spirit, and our true selves.

If *Zechariah's* four horses symbolized *the Spirit of God* bringing *peace on earth*, the four *Riders of Revelation* depict *the spirit of sin*, shattering peace, bringing despair and destruction

through *conquest, violence, injustice*, and ultimately *death*. This is the human story as told by Revelation which, as we've said, isn't meant to be read *literally*, but *literarily*. This is ancient Jewish science fiction, using fantastical symbolism to tell a familiar *story*. And while the *first four* seals tell the story of *sin*, the *final three* offer three very different *responses to sin*.

The fifth seal gives a glimpse of the already-martyred souls in the heavenly realm:

"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?'" (Revelation 6:10)

The martyrs had met with sin's ultimate aim—*death*—and their blood cries for *vengeance*, for Jesus to act as judge, jury, and executioner on their behalf. This isn't heaven's security cam footage; it's a *story* John is telling to readers familiar with sin's ways, having suffered *conquest, violence, poverty*, and *death* at the hands of the Roman Empire. Justifiably, they want *payback*.

So, in the sixth seal, John offers them the all-time *revenge-fantasy*. But in a *be-careful-what-you-wish-for* moment, the vengeance they crave is so far-reaching, it destroys everyone in its wake. This judgment unfolds in seven *de-creation* scenes. The *earth* quakes, the *sun* dies, the *moon* goes red, *stars* fall from the sky, *trees* drop their fruit, both *sky* and *dry land* disappear. It's a reversal of [Genesis 1](#), bringing ruin upon the earth's *kings, princes, generals*, the *rich, mighty, slave* and *free*. In the Bible, *seven* signifies *completeness*, and it's as if the cosmos is completely unraveling, taking *everything* and *everyone* with it. In vain they seek protection or escape, and cry out in a unified voice, **"Who can stand?"** (Rev 6:17) This is the central question of the seals: *who can stand the judgment of sin?* Now, the Greek word for *stand* here means... well, *stand*. It's an insignificant word that will reappear to play a crucial role in the next chapter.

But to recap, the first *six* seals describe the horrifying effects of sin, a cry for vengeance, and a judgment so terrible that no one is spared, leaving all humanity asking, *who can stand?*

At this point, we need to talk about the structure of this section of Revelation. The *Seven Seals* is one of 3 stories—*The Seven Seals, Seven Trumpets, and Seven Bowls*—each of which has a seven-part structure. And in each story, parts *one-through-six* are separated from part *seven*. This isn't a new idea; it's taken from the Bible's *creation* story, which follows the same pattern: six days of creation, followed by *one* day of rest, called *The Sabbath*. John's story of *humanity* mirrors the story of humanity's *creation*. And importantly, in John's stories, between parts *one-through-six* and part *seven*, is an *interlude*, like a cutaway in a sit-com. And these *interludes* are the interpretive key to understanding the story. In *The Story of the Seals*, between the *sixth* and *seventh* seal, John gives us *Chapter 7*, an *interlude* that *interrupts* in order to *interpret*.

“Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: *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.*” (Revelation 7:3)

As four angels hold back God's judgment, another comes to *seal* God's true servants. I love the wordplay here—seven *seals* had kept God's plan *protected* but, now *open*, they reveal *another* seal, marking God's true people for protection *from judgment*. **“Then** (he says) ***I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000.*”** (Rev 7:4) Now, different traditions hold a variety of views on the identity of the 144,000, but what John is describing here is a military census, like the one in **Numbers 1**, 12,000 soldiers from each of the twelve tribes of Israel—it's the sound of an assembling army, sealed with divine protection... *but to what purpose?* It's as if God is raising an army to answer the prayer of the martyrs—to *avenge their blood*. That's what John hears, but then he *looks* and *sees* perhaps the first breath of fresh air in this passage.

“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.’”

Revelation 7:9-10

Now, we’ve seen this before—John *hearing one* thing and then *seeing* something else entirely. In Chapter 5, he *hears* a *lion*, but *sees* a *lamb*. Here, John hears a great army—144,000 *strong*—but then he *sees* an uncountable multitude from every class and culture. Incredibly, he *sees* them *standing*. *Standing* in God’s presence. *Standing* in *worship*. *Standing* in *good standing* before God. We’re meant to wonder, *how is this possible?! And we’re not the only ones asking!*

“One of the elders asked me, ‘These in white robes, who are they, and where did they come from?’ I answered, ‘Sir, you know.’ And he 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.’” (Revelation 7:13-14)

Don’t get tripped up by the word *tribulation* here, a word co-opted by those looking to Revelation for a timeline of future events. John is simply describing the age in which he lives, a time of great suffering for Jesus-people, revealing that what makes God’s people able not only to *withstand* suffering, but to *stand* in God’s presence is the shed blood of the Slain Lamb, *Jesus*. That’s the *seal* that protects them from judgment. The clean robes come from *Zechariah*—the *source of the four horses*—who also saw a vision of a priest named Joshua, *standing* before God.

“Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Take off his filthy clothes.’ Then he said to Joshua, ‘See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.’” (Zechariah 3:3-7)

The filthy clothes represent a life stained by *sin*. Isaiah also uses this image to say that in light of God’s perfection, **“all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” (Is 64:6)** However *good* or *bad* we think we are, our sin makes us unfit to *stand* in God’s presence. This should leave us all asking, then *who can stand?* And as we’ve seen, the good news is that, by a miracle of grace, our filthy robes can be washed clean, the stain of sin removed from our lives, by dipping them in

Christ's blood—an intentionally ironic image of receiving the limitless *grace* and all-inclusive *mercy* of God. Friends, *this* is Jesus' response to sin: not to avenge *our* blood, but to offer *his*; not to judge us, but to cleanse us; not to punish us for our sin, but to take our sins away.

John goes on to describe this great multitude, standing tall and transformed, by stitching together a cut-and-paste collection of quotes from the prophet *Isaiah*, revealing our true hope:

“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.’ (Rev 7:15-17/Isaiah 25:8, 49:10)

This is the hope of all who, rather than wishing judgment on *others* or trying to escape it *ourselves*, simply wash our filthy-robos clean in the blood-soaked grace and mercy of Jesus.

Sadly, we can get so lost in John's story-telling style, overwhelmed by his depiction of *sin* and *judgment*, that we miss his point; that, though the reality of *sin* is far worse than we realize, and though God's *judgment* is father-reaching and more terrible than we can possibly imagine, God's *mercy* is immeasurably greater than *both* of them. As Jesus' half-brother, wrote, **“*Mercy triumphs over judgment.*” (James 2:13)** Every time. For everyone. This is the Jesus-response to sin. Still, like John's 144,000, we can tend to assume God's mercy is restricted only to a select few. Our still sin-stained imagination and limited grasp of grace can still crave the revenge-fantasy for those who've wronged us, those we think don't *deserve* grace, forgetting that grace isn't for those who *deserve* it; it's for those who know they *don't*, who know how deeply they *need* it. John's vision is an interlude from our desire for judgment, an interruption to disrupt our way of thinking, an alternative to vengeance, revealing that the seal of Christ's sacrificial love covers a multitude of sins, not for a select few, but for an uncountable multitude—for *everyone*!

The question is, in which of these visions are we placing our hope? Do we want the God of grace for ourselves, but the God of *vengeance* for others? Are we *standing* on our ability to keep our robes clean, our lives stain-free? Or like a mighty army, are we trying to *stand* in God's place as judge, jury, and executer of divine punishment? Or maybe you've given up hope of ever being able to *stand* before God, cowering instead in fear, hiding in shame? Friends, hear me say, the *Story of the Seven Seals* isn't meant to instill *fear* in us, but to inspire *faith*. To give us hope that we can in fact *stand* before God; not in our own strength, but by the grace of Jesus alone.

For some, it's an invitation to come out of hiding—to let Jesus wash our robes clean in his blood. If that's you, whatever role sin has played in your story up to now, Jesus welcomes you with open arms, and wants to free you from the self-destructive and relationally-harmful patterns of sin. For others, it means laying down the self-righteous desire to see *others* get what we think *they* deserve; remembering Jesus, who chose to die for his enemies, rather than kill them, and taught us to pray, ***"forgive us our sins as we forgive those who've sinned against us."*** (Matt 6:12) The Story of the 7 Seals interrupts the story of *sin* with an interlude of *grace*.

Friends, this is God's response to sin; not *judgment*, but *mercy*. John's vision shows that what enables us to *stand before God, in this life and in eternity*, isn't our spiritual superiority or our ability to avoid judgment; it's what Jesus has done at the cross, taking on the powers of *conquest, violence, injustice, and death*, and shedding his own blood in sacrificial love to rescue and redeem us, to take away our sin, to free us from fear and shame, to destroy evil and death and replace our filthy rags with garments of grace, washed clean as freshly-fallen snow in the cleansing blood of Christ.

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Finally, we come to the *seventh* seal. In **Chapter 8:1**, John writes:

“When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.” (8:1)

If you recall, *The Story of the 7 Seals* began with a loud, thunderous voice, but it ends in *silence*. In the Bible, silence before God is a form of *worship*—an expression and experience of peace and rest, like the Sabbath rest on Day 7 of Creation, the story John is mirroring to remind us of how our story ends—not in conquest, violence, injustice, or death, but eternal peace and rest, in worshipful awe of the Lamb, the ultimate revelation of God’s limitless grace. No more vengeance, no more judgment, no more armies, no more fear, hunger, or thirst, no more tears—Complete peace and rest. And we can enter into that story of peace and rest *right now*, by trusting in Jesus. And as an act of stepping into that rest, I want make space for *silence*, for prayerful reflection, worship, and awe, for expressing quiet trust in the cleansing blood of Jesus.

[Break the silence gently to set up communion—an act of remembering and receiving Christ’s sacrifice. As a symbolic gesture, invite people to *stand* as they receive the bread and juice.]