THE LAMB WILL BE THEIR SHEPHERD

Revelation 6:1-8:1

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.’”

Today’s passage covers the seven seals of God’s judgments on the world. God’s judgment can cause us to wonder how he can still be a God of love. But in today’s passage we also see that God remembers the prayers of those who suffer for him. He’s careful to protect his people. He has a vision to save people from all nations. His ultimate vision is to comfort his servants in his eternal home. In this study we want to learn what God’s purpose in his acts of judgment is. We especially want to think about his promise that the Lamb will be our shepherd. How could a lamb be a shepherd? And why do we *need* a shepherd, anyway? Many of us would like to think that we’re independent, self-sufficient, and definitely in no need of a shepherd. But God’s heart is to relate to us as our Shepherd. Maybe, we all need a shepherd, more than we’d like to admit. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

In chapter 5 John saw a vision of a scroll in God’s right hand sealed with seven seals. There was no one worthy to open it, until the Lamb who was slain appeared. This scroll contained God’s will and God’s plan for all mankind. Now in chapter 6 the Lamb begins to break open the seven seals. Thus begins the major section of the Book of Revelation. Revelation 6–20 mainly describes God’s acts of judgment on this world. They’re not necessarily in chronological order, but they're vivid metaphorical descriptions. We shouldn't make the mistake of studying Revelation to figure out how these things are being fulfilled in world events; we should be studying Revelation to learn more about God, about Jesus, and about what God wants from us. These acts of judgment are organized into three sets of seven: seals, trumpets and bowls (see image). As we’ve seen, the number seven represents perfection or completion. The number three could represent the Trinity, wholeness or inner sanctity. So three sets of seven judgments on the world tell us that God’s judgment is perfect, thorough and holy.

In 6:1–8, when the first four seals are opened, we encounter what’s known as “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” It may sound old and boring, but actually they’re really famous. The British band Judas Priest used them. So did Marvel comic books and the X Men movies. People have them tattooed on their backs. The evangelist Billy Graham wrote a book about them. These Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have been depicted in Christian art for centuries.

Who are they, and what do they mean? Four horsemen were actually an image of God’s judgment in the Old Testament prophecy of Zechariah 6:1–8. There, the horses also have four colors: red, white, black and dappled. God promised to send them to four different directions throughout the earth (cf. Zech 1:8–10). Here in Revelation 6:1–8 there are again four horses: white, red, black and pale. When John sees them, he exclaims, “a white horse!” or “a black horse!” or “a pale horse!” They’re not cute, elderly horses fenced in on a peaceful country farm. They’re scary, powerful, and really fast. Once they’re running lose, horses are hard to stop, and they can go really long distances. So horses are a good symbol for God’s judgment. Their colors are also symbolic: white for conquest, red for slaughter, black for famine, and pale for death. John describes each of the riders of the horses. The first rider is holding a bow, has a crown, and is a conqueror bent on conquest. The second has power to take peace from the earth and make people kill each other, and he has a large sword. The third is holding a pair of scales. And the fourth is named Death, and Hades is following close behind him. All four riders have power to kill by the sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth (8). These horses and their riders are released all at the same time. Their unleashing is a metaphor for God’s wrath and judgment. In these four horsemen there seems to be a progression. The first is conquest from invasion; the second is death from civil war; the third is the hardship of famine, when food prices are ten times greater than normal, and food has to be rationed out by careful measurement; the fourth is an atmosphere of death and hopelessness that follows invasion, war and starvation.

In his prediction of the signs of the end of the age Jesus also mentioned international and civil wars and famines as “the beginning of birth pains” (Mk13:7,8). These things have been happening throughout human history, but especially ever since Jesus died and rose from the dead, and they’ll continue to happen until he comes again. They’re not locked in to a deterministic “cause and effect” view of the world, but in a sense these wars and famines are a form of God’s judgment. In verse 8 we see one more important detail. It says they were given power over only a fourth of the earth. It tells us that it’s just a partial judgment; there’s more to come, and it's going to get gradually worse.

We notice some other important things in verses 1–8. First of all, it’s the Lamb who opens the seals (1,3,5,7); the horsemen can’t go out into the earth until he unleashes them; their acts of judgment on the earth are under his control. Second, each of the four living creatures calls them, saying, “Come!” It again tells us that they’re under the control of God and his angels. Third, in verses 1–8 the horsemen are each “given” something. It means that God gives them their abilities to enact his judgment on the earth. Sometimes, tragedies seem random. We need to remember that God uses them to serve his own good purposes (Ro8:28). So what *is* God’s purpose in unleashing these horses, bringing invasion, civil war, starvation, massive death and attacks by wild beasts? Simply speaking, it’s to help people repent (cf. 9:20,21). In our sins we human beings all tend to be stubborn and unrepentant (Ro2:5), so sadly, it often takes real suffering to bring us to our knees and truly come to God.

Next, let’s look at the opening of the fifth seal. Read verses 9–11. This seal is different from the first four. It gives us a glimpse of those who’ve been “slain” because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained (9b). It’s the same word used three times to describe Jesus the Lamb in chapter 5 (5:6,9,12); literally it’s translated “slaughtered.” Here, their souls are under the altar in heaven, and they’re calling out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Who are these people? They’re the prophets of the Old Testament who were killed by God’s people who refused to repent (16:6; 18:24). It reminds us of the blood of Abel, who was murdered by his brother Cain, and whose blood cried out to God from the ground (Ge4:10). Jesus himself predicted that God would avenge the blood of his prophets (Mt23:35; Lk11:51). But this also includes those who were slaughtered simply because they believed in Jesus. In Revelation 2 we learned of Antipas, who was killed in the city of Pergamum because of his undying faith in Jesus. Revelation will mention many others who overcame the devil and kept their faith in Jesus, even unto death, by depending on the blood of Jesus and the word of God (12:11). Nero persecuted Christians in AD 65. Under the Roman Emperors Diocletian and Maximian, from AD 270–304, the worst systematic torture and execution of Christians happened in history, known as “the era of martyrs.” Believers who first read Revelation were facing hostility from the world who misunderstood them. Christians were accused of cannibalism because of their communion ceremony, and of incest because they called each other brother and sister. Sometimes, mobs would come and stone them. Persecution and use and abuse of Christians has been going on ever since, to this very day.

The opening of the fifth seal is meant to be a great comfort to suffering Christians. Read verse 11. God rewarded them with the white robe of victory and promised to avenge their blood after the full number of their fellow servants were killed. It tells us an important truth: God answers the prayers of his suffering servants. In the end God will avenge and vindicate them. Instead of trying to get revenge, lashing out at those who hurt us, or despairing, God wants us to have patient faith. God wants us to entrust our lives to his hands and let him get vengeance, following the example of Jesus (Ro12:19–21; 1 Pe2:23). God also wants us to cry out to him persistently for his justice to come on earth (Lk18:7,8).

Now let’s look at the opening of the sixth seal. Read verses 12–14. This act of judgment speeds forward to the end of the world. Quoting the prophecy of Isaiah, Jesus also predicted these very things will someday happen (Mk13:25; cf. Isa13:10; 34:4; 2Pe3:10). When the sun, moon and stars are gone and the heavens are rolled up like a scroll, it’s none other than the end of the world. At that time there’ll be no more second chances, no more time to repent. How will people respond? Read verses 15–17. They hide and want to die instantly instead of face the wrath of God. Again, Jesus predicted that this would happen (Lk23: 30; cf. Hos10:8). John emphasizes in verse 15 that it’s the rich and powerful who will suddenly be cowering. They have confidence in their power and wealth to save themselves, and it keeps them proud and unrepentant to the end. But on that day, they’re hiding with everybody else, totally helpless. The opening of the sixth seal shows us that nobody can stand the day of God’s wrath with their own power or ability or their own self-righteousness (Mal3:2).

After the opening of the first six seals John pauses to tell us about other visions he had, before the opening of the seventh seal (8:1). Read 7:1–4. God is holding back harming the earth until he can mark his servants. What’s the purpose of the mark? It’s to protect them (9:4). It’s called a seal. This seal from God to mark us as his people has a specific meaning for all Christians. Ephesians 1:13,14 reads, “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.” The point is, God is careful to mark each one of his servants who belong to him, to protect them from his judgment. In the midst of his judgment God saves those who’ve repented and accepted his grace.

In the list of the tribes of Israel in verses 5–8 we see some unusual things. First is the number 12. There are 12 tribes, but unusually, 12,000 in each tribe sealed by God. In the Old Testament, the population of the tribes varied widely, from large to small, but here, each tribe has exactly the same number of sealed people. What’s more, the list of the tribes’ names is different from the Old Testament. They were usually listed in chronological order, in the order of their births, but here, Judah comes first. It’s because God’s covenant of salvation was passed down through this tribe, all the way to Jesus. Also, we notice the tribes of Dan and Ephraim are missing. It’s because of their sins against God. This list symbolizes the spiritual Israel, God’s true people of all time. These 144,000 are blessed to share Jesus’ victory and sing his praises (14:1,3). They seem like a spiritual elite. But then John tells us of another vision.

Read verses 9,10. It’s a great multitude no one can count. They’re not Jewish; they’re from every nation, tribe, people and language. They’re all so different, but they’re all wearing white robes and holding palm branches. They’re all awaiting the coming of Jesus the King. They’re all singing his praises. John sees something else. Read verses 11,12. The angels are all praising God for bringing all these people to be with him around his throne. It’s God’s great victory. It seems the world is stubborn and unrepentant to the end, but in the midst of his acts of judgment God works a miracle to save such a great multitude. Then what happens? Read verse 13. The focus in this vision of God’s throne room is on the great multitude in white robes. One of the elders wants John to know how they got there. How did John respond?

Read verse 14. Here, “the great tribulation” refers to all six seals being opened. It refers more broadly to all the suffering in this world that all true believers in Jesus have to suffer (Ro8:17,18; 1Pe2:20,21; 4:13). These people are those mentioned back in chapter 5: “…with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.” God wants his gospel to be shared with all people of the world (14:6). This was God’s purpose in raising Abraham, establishing the nation of Israel and sending Jesus: to bless all peoples of all nations (Ge22:17,18).

How could all these people make it into heaven? Verse 14 says they “have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” They were humble enough to accept the blood of Jesus. Only they have the right to go into heaven (22:14). Only the blood of Jesus can purify us from all sin and bring us into true fellowship with God and with one another (1Jn1:7). God really wants us to share this vision, to bring the good news of Jesus to all peoples of all nations.

The elder goes on to describe them. Read verses 15–17. This is a vision of heaven. There is the throne of God and his temple. There, God is at the center, not human beings. God is being served day and night. God shelters his people with his own presence. It’s a place where there’s no more hunger or thirst, and no more suffering. Read verse 17 again. The Lamb at the center of the throne is Jesus. And he’s called our shepherd. He’s our good shepherd now, because he laid down his life for us (Jn10:11). He shepherds us in this life through his intercessory prayers, giving us the Holy Spirit and reminding us of his words at crucial moments. But he will shepherd us forever in God’s kingdom. How will he do that? It says he’ll wipe every tear from our eyes. It’s another fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy (Isa25:7,8; 49:10). Jesus will comfort us after all the suffering we have endured for his sake. The early Christians faced all kinds of sufferings. Actually, so do we. We have to live in a world full of sin, death and curse. When we follow Jesus, we deny ourselves and take up our own crosses (Mk8:34) We also suffer persecution for his name’s sake. But our hope is to one day be with our Shepherd Jesus, who is like a gentle lamb who was slain. He will personally comfort us with his tender love and with his presence forever. This is our true hope. Often in this world it seems like we have no shepherd. But according to this verse, Jesus is our eternal shepherd, waiting for us in God’s kingdom. Having this hope in our hearts enables us to endure all the suffering.

Read 8:1. The silence is stunning. It’s also a contrast to the seven trumpets about to sound. It tells us of God’s awesome presence and his sovereign control of all things.

Today we learned that God wants us to make it to heaven by accepting the blood of Jesus, and in heaven he wants to comfort us forever. God hears our prayers and wants us to have patient faith and leave all vengeance to him. We also learned that God sends his agents of wrath to lead people to repentance. May God wake us up spiritually and give us living hope in him.