

have tried to do. We may think we understand the lamp-stands, seals, trumpets, bowls... but the messages of the thunders are hidden from us.

- “They did not repent...” Someone has quipped, “More flies are caught in honey than in vinegar.” We have believed that love rather than hell-fire will attract people to the gospel. Yet in the end there needs to be warning as well as wooing. What words or actions do you think would begin to turn the unbelieving world towards God?

The two witnesses (11.1-13) are “dressed in sackcloth” and also represent the call to repentance, even though their words and actions express so much of the judgment of God. The beast fights against them and kills them, but when they are raised to life and taken up into heaven, “The rest of the people were terrified and praised the greatness of the God of heaven” (v. 13). Even this, however, does not signify repentance.

Read: Revelation 11.12-19

W. Hendricksen notes, “To be sure, God always reigns. Yet that power and authority which He exercises with respect to the universe is not always apparent. At times it seems as if Satan is the supreme ruler. But once the judgment day has arrived, the full royal splendour of God’s sovereignty will be revealed, for all opposition will then be abolished. Then it will be clear to all that the world has become the province of our Lord and of His Christ. And He shall reign for ever and ever.”

Twice in v. 18 we have the words “The time has come...” God always acts according to his own perfect timing. Recall Paul’s words in 2 Cor. 6.2, “Listen! This is the hour to receive God’s favour; today is the day to be saved” (AV “now is the accepted time...”). This present era of grace does not go on for ever. It will end and there will be reward and judgment.

- “God always reigns”. What does that mean for the foundation and confidence of our spiritual life?
- “This present era of grace does not go on for ever”. What difference should that make to our priorities and activities as a church?

Study 4: Seven Signs and Seven Plagues – Revelation 12-16



The Victory of the Lamb

3. Seven Seals & Seven Trumpets



A whole variety of factors and circumstances combine to affect our perception of any given situation.

I recall an occasion years ago when we took our children to the Brisbane Ekka. At one point it was necessary for me to take two small boys to the conveniences – inconveniently located on the other side of the walkway between the two ovals.

The stream of pedestrians was heavy and constant – and our need increasingly urgent. A boy on each hand, I moved forward into the crowd – looking for each small break and each understanding eye. It took twenty minutes – just made it!

Now, I am tall enough to see over most of the heads in the crowd. I know that this crowd isn’t forever. I know we are making progress. I can see when we are nearly there. But for the boys it is all crowd. In spite of reassurances, they aren’t sure how far through we are, whether we will be on time... We are going together, but our perception of the situation is quite different.

A Glimpse into Heaven

Read: Revelation 4.8-11

The seven churches have heard what their Lord has to say to them. But what they now need is the perspective of the divine and eternal purpose.

W. Hendricksen comments that, when tribulations befall us, we (quite naturally) tend to view them from a human and earthly perspective. He writes, “We see God’s footstool. Let us not forget his throne! To be sure, we say that to them that love God all things work together for good; but do we really believe it? Sometimes we speak and act as if the control of events and the destiny of the world rested in the hands of *men* instead of in the hands of God.”

But now, in chapter 5, there is a scroll sealed with seven seals – “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” (v.2) The scroll contains the world’s destiny in seven parts. For each part the seal must be broken to reveal the contents.

T.F. Torrance notes, “The secrets of the world belong to God and no man can pry into them. Who knows what a day or a night may bring forth? Who knows what this year holds in its dark unknown future? Even the strong angels of God are unable to open the book. Only God can unseal the seals and read the secrets of men.”

But Christ is worthy. He is described as “the Lion from Judah’s tribe” who “has won the victory” (v.5). John looks and sees a Lamb which appears to have been killed (v.6). Now the whole of heaven sings praise to the Lamb. Note that in v.13 he is praised equally with the Father.

- Reflect for a moment on our perception of the events of history – and the way God sees them.
- How significant is it for us to be aware of “the throne”?
- How possible is it for us to escape the apprehension, pessimism and (sometimes) terror of our earthly view of the events of history?

The Seals

Read: Revelation 6.9-17

Leon Morris comments, “As we survey the picture revealed by the opening of the seals we may be a little surprised. The picture is a grim one, but it is not particularly new. War, bloody conquest, famine and pestilence are found in many apocalypses. We begin to wonder why John wept at the prospect of such well-known contents remaining undisclosed (5.4). But there is something new here, and that is the place of the church. The martyrs are singled out in verses 9 ff., and chapter 7 is given over to the great multitude of the redeemed. John sees God as in control of the whole process and God is concerned for His people. So, though apocalyptic judgments be loosed against all mankind, God’s people need never be dismayed. They will be preserved no matter what the tribulation. That is the precious new revelation.”

- God’s people are sealed on their foreheads (7.2-4). They are protected from God’s wrath, but not from persecution. Reflect on the words of Jesus in Matthew 5.10-12.
- We are constantly urged to forgive, not to pay back evil for evil, to love even our enemies... Jesus taught this by example as well as by word. Yet this passage shows the righteous martyrs calling for an avenging of evil. Read Romans 12.17-21. We live in the era of grace and love. How important is it that justice finally be done?

Read: Revelation 7.9-17

To quote Leon Morris again, “The complete efficacy of Christ’s atoning work is being strongly expressed. It is on the grounds of His death for men that they are able to stand before the throne properly clothed. This is a further indication that the throng comprises all the saved and not simply the martyrs or some other group. For all are saved in this way and no other.”

This passage presents us with a very beautiful picture of heaven. We are both cleansed and clothed because of Christ’s death, set free from distress and sadness, worshipping, guided and growing... Heaven is not static, stagnating or boring. There is freedom from sin and its evil effects – freedom to grow and become throughout eternity.

- We will spend longer in heaven than we have done on earth. What do you see as the major promises and expectations of the future life?

The Trumpets

Michael Wilcock thinks that the “heaven” into which John has peeped might be better defined “the sphere of spiritual reality”. Certainly the seals have been portraying history good and bad from that perspective. The trumpets, however, are God’s warning of impending judgment.

Read: Revelation 9.20-10.4,10-11

Leon Morris comments, “The trumpet judgments do not concern the church as such. They are God’s judgments on the world. A good deal of Revelation is taken up with this kind of thing. Human wickedness does not go unnoticed in heaven. God has His own way and His own time for dealing with it... Whereas the seals drew our attention to judgment as following more or less inevitably on the sins of men, the trumpets rather direct our attention to the divine activity. God moves against sin. We should also bear in mind that these are not the final judgments. In each case a third only is affected, and this serves as a warning. Indeed, the sound of the trumpet is essentially to give warning (Ezek. 33.3).”

This is highlighted in 9.20-21, words that remind us of what Paul wrote about God’s anger against sin in Rom.1.18ff. With his judgments God places before people the very real possibility of repentance.

What the seven thunders have said is sealed. This adds to the general warning against trying to work this book into an historical scheme as many