

A series in REVELATION

13 July Monday

Read Revelation 6:1-8

John's vision is of the Lamb on the throne, worshipped by all, and of the scroll and seals that only Jesus can open. This vision is umbilically connected to earth, as we see here: when the seals are opened, their impact is felt on the earth. One of the most famous images from this book, follows – the four horsemen. A white horse, a red horse, a black horse and a pale horse, each bringing devastation in different ways. Now it's good to remember that the symbols are just that – symbols; John does not expect us to look out of the window one day and see four horsemen! They represent variously, the devastation of war, economic inequality and hardship, sickness and death. N.T. Wright puts it this way, 'unless we lay out the problems to their full extent, no real healing can take place. Unless the ills of the world are brought out, shown up in their true colours, put on display and allowed to do their worst, they cannot be overthrown... things have to be exposed before they can be dealt with... things have to come to light before the surgeon can perform the operation...' John is writing to encourage and strengthen the churches. Yet, he doesn't do it by telling half-truths or palatable stories, but instead by telling them the truth. It's like he says, 'look, it's going to get hard, the poison of evil runs deep and wide in the world, but God is not ignoring it; He is at work, and will eventually make all things new'.

I remember reading 'we're going on a bear hunt' to my kids. The repeated line, every time they encounter a challenge (like mud or tall grass) is 'we can't go under it, can't go over it, can't go around it, have to go through it'. 'Through it', is not always desirable, not often easy and rarely without cost, but often it is the only way to the other side. In the Gospels, Jesus says, 'in this world you will have trouble' – ever since Eden we have waded through a world in which sin

and darkness canter around – however, Jesus goes on, ‘but take heart for I have overcome the world.’

Sometimes, the most strengthening words are those that prepare us for reality – that speak of ‘through’ rather than ‘around’, ‘over’ or ‘under’.

14 July Tuesday

Read Revelation 6:9-17

The next two seals are opened and we have two images: Christians killed for their faith, crying out for justice, and also the vivid imagery of cosmic catastrophe. Again, we must be mindful of literary genre. Apocalyptic literature is full of vivid and loud imagery that is not meant to be taken literally – it paints with strong colours! With regard to the first image, these martyrs (those killed for faith in Christ, as many were, and indeed are) call out for justice, as do all who have been deeply wronged. One author writes, 'this is not petty or spiteful vengeance, but the heart-aching desire to see the world brought back into balance at last...' These martyrs are told to wait: 'It will happen, but wait...' With regard to the cosmic images, they have a strong Old Testament heritage as a regular way of talking about, in N.T. Wright's words, 'earth shattering events'. This does not imply earthquakes per se, but significant shifts in the world; things like, in our world, the Berlin wall coming down, or, in their world, things like the fall of Jerusalem. Imagery and metaphor help capture the gravity of such moments in a way that words alone don't.

The phrase 'wrath of the lamb' is paradoxical; lambs being synonymous with gentleness, not anger. And we should allow the paradox to soften our edges, there is a tension here that must not be lost; veer too far in either extreme and we have lost it. God is angry at the evil that has poisoned and spoiled the world, and we need Him to be! What kind of a God would He be if He were neither here nor there about evil?! And so, He will judge wickedness and the powers of darkness, rightly. But at the same time, He is the lamb who was slain – whose ultimate victory came through sacrificial love and who is rich in mercy. Any attempt to paint God as malicious and arbitrarily vengeful misses the mark; any attempt to paint Him as unconcerned or apathetic with regards to evil in

the world does too.

Perhaps the old song, 'On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is shifting sand' could be our prayer today. That no matter what we face, no matter how turbulent the world politically, no matter how dark or troubling the news: Jesus is with us, and He is faithful, He is just and He is merciful. We can trust him with all the complexity we see.

15 July Wednesday

Read Revelation 7:1-8

There is a pause in the 'opening of the seals' here. Instead, we have angels holding back winds and putting a 'seal' on the forehead of those who are 'the faithful' and we also have a numerical count of them.

The seal here is different to in the previous chapters; instead, it's a mark of ownership – a branding – which says, 'this is mine'. It is in some ways akin to the way we might employ our signature today. This seal protects those who have it from the 'winds of trouble' that will blow on the earth. Like with the people of Israel avoiding the plagues in Egypt when the door was marked with the blood of a lamb, reminiscent too of a similar story in Ezekiel 9 where those sealed are saved from all the trouble that followed; here God will protect and preserve those who have put their trust in Him. The identity of 144,000 is widely debated. The number is almost certainly representative. The number 12 was often used to symbolise completion: 12 x 12 then symbolises perfect completion; the fullness of the people of God. Some take the people here to be ethnic Israel, others take it to include all who have trusted in Jesus, Jews and Gentiles, as the new 'people of God'. What is certain, as we shall see, is of God's promise to protect those who are His, in the face of evil in the world and His judgement of it.

It's encouraging to think that whilst 'we don't know what waits ahead, we do know who walks beside'. God is with us and we are His – that much is true. When trouble comes, don't doubt it – double down on it.

16 July Thursday

Read Revelation 7:9-17

John hears the number of 144,000 but then sees 'a multitude, that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language...' He hears one thing but sees another – reminiscent perhaps of 'hearing' Lion and 'seeing' Lamb in chapter 5. What he hears is a number that represents completion put in terms of the tribes of Israel – the original 'people of God' – but what he sees is a huge mass of people, from every nation and language, uncountable, worshipping God. These two passages side by side show that there is no numerical limit intended here, nor an ethnic one. The crowd is made up of huge numbers and wide diversity and they are holding palms (symbolic of victory) and they are dressed in white (symbolic of purity and victory) – garments like those Jesus counsels the church in Laodicea to purchase from him, if you remember in chapter 3.

So who are these people? That's the question that verses 13 and 14 engage. They are those whose clothes are white because they have been washed in the 'blood of the lamb'; that is to say, those who truly received the redemption and forgiveness of sins that Jesus' death won for them. And they are those who have come out of the tribulation; that is, the difficulties that faithful followers of Jesus will live through in a world where sin is present, where the devil is active, and the judgement of God on all that wickedness is at work. So, who are they? They are those in Laodicea and Smyrna and Ephesus and the rest, who stayed faithful to Jesus through persecution and trouble. For those who endure, who hold on, victory awaits, along with peace. The verses at the end are deeply encouraging, God himself will quiet them with his presence, lead them to springs of living water, and wipe away every tear from their eyes.

And 'they' are also us, too, as we hold unswervingly to the hope we have in Jesus, come what may. **Perhaps you could pray today that we would be people, and that we would be a church, who hold unswervingly to Christ no matter what waves crash around and against us.**

17 July Friday

Read Zechariah 6:1-8

Take some time to notice the Old Testament backdrop to images and phrases that John uses in the book of Revelation. For those to whom it was originally written, these things would have been immediately clear; the images would have functioned like hyperlinks opening up a whole world of meaning. It reminds us, like John Bodily mentioned in talk 1, of the important principle: whilst this book is for us, it was not originally written to us. **As you read today, notice the internal links and referencing within the Bible itself.**