

Revelation week # 19

The Seventh Seal

Revelation 8:1-5

I. Introduction

- a. Read
- b. The future Day of the Lord will be the climactic time of judgment that ends man's day and Satan's rule on earth.
- c. During that time, God will take back the earth in a final holocaust of wholesale destruction.
- d. The first five seals (false peace, war, famine, death, and vengeance) describe the preliminary judgments leading to the full outpouring of divine wrath during the Day of the Lord.
- e. As horrifying as those preliminary judgments are, they pale before the terrors of the sixth seal, which marks the beginning of the Day of the Lord.
- f. So terrifying are the judgments of the sixth seal that people are finally forced to acknowledge God as the source of the calamities.
 - i. At that point they will cry "to the mountains and to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?' " (6:16–17).
- g. When the Lamb opens the seventh and last seal on the little scroll that was the title deed to the earth (5:1), the judgments of the Day of the Lord will intensify and expand dramatically.
- h. This final seal contains within it the full sweep of the remaining divine judgments of the time of the Great Tribulation, including the trumpet and bowl judgments. T

- i. Though some believe the events of the trumpet and bowl judgments happen simultaneously with those of the sixth seal, it seems better to understand them as telescoping out of each other sequentially.
- j. That the seventh seal contains the seven trumpet judgments seems clear, since there is no description of judgment in the seventh seal, but an anticipation of severe judgment followed immediately in the text by the seven trumpet judgments.
- k. In a similar manner, the seventh trumpet does not describe a judgment (10:7; 11:15–17), but rather contains the anticipation of heavenly rejoicing over the judgment to come, which will lead to the final destruction and establishment of the rule of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- l. As 10:7 indicates, the seventh trumpet is the “finish.” Chapter 15 verse 1 makes clear that the seventh trumpet, which finishes the work of judgment, contains the final fury of God’s wrath, which the pouring out of seven plague judgments pictures:
 - i. “Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels who had seven plagues, which are the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished.” Chapter 16, verse 1, identifies these seven plagues as “seven bowls of the wrath of God.”
 - ii. They are then described in detail in the remainder of chapter 16 (vv. 2–21).
- m. The progressive judgments within the seventh seal will take place over an indefinite period of time; the effects of the fifth trumpet, for example, will last for five months (9:10).
 - i. While the exact timetable for the trumpet and bowl judgments is not revealed, their escalating devastation indicates that they all occur during the last half of the Tribulation.

- ii. Therefore, the seventh seal encompasses all of God's final wrath up to the triumphant return of the Lord Jesus Christ in glory.
- n. Four key words may be used to describe the events associated with the opening of the seventh seal: silence, sounding, supplication, and storm.

II. **Silence.**

- a. **When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. (8:1)**
- b. As the rightful heir to the universe, **the Lamb** took the scroll (the title deed to the earth) from the Father's hand (5:7).
- c. As He unrolled it and broke the first six seals, divine judgments were poured out on the earth.
- d. But when He **broke the seventh seal** a unique response occurred: **there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.**
- e. A review of the visions up to this point makes it clear that John had heard a good deal of noise in heaven.
 - i. Emanating from God's throne were "sounds and peals of thunder" (4:5).
 - ii. "The four living creatures ... [did] not cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come' " (4:8), while the twenty-four elders added their song of praise (4:11).
 - iii. In 5:2 John heard a "strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?' "
 - iv. In response to the Lamb's taking of the title deed to the earth (5:5–7), first the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders (5:9–10), then an innumerable host of angels (5:11–12), and finally all of creation (5:13) joined in praising God.

- v. When the Lamb opened the first seal, John “heard one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, ‘Come’ ” (6:1)—as he would when the second (6:3), third (6:5), and fourth (6:7) seals were opened. With the opening of the fifth seal came the cries of the martyrs for vengeance (6:9–10), while the breaking of the sixth seal brought the loud roar of a powerful earthquake (6:12).
- vi. In the interlude between the sixth and seventh seals, an angel “cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, ‘Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads’ ” (7:2–3).
- vii. Later in that interlude John wrote, After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”(7:9–13)
- f. But after all that loudness, as the full fury of the final judgments is about to be released, **silence** falls on the heavenly scene.

- i. The implication is that when the judgment about to happen becomes visible as the seventh seal is broken and the scroll unrolled, both the redeemed and the angels are reduced to silence in anticipation of the grim reality of the destruction they see written on the scroll.
 - ii. The **half an hour** of silence is the calm before the storm. It is the silence of foreboding, of intense expectation, of awe at what God is about to do.
- g. And silence is the only proper response to such divine judgment.
 - i. In Psalm 76:8–9 the psalmist wrote, “The earth feared and was still when God arose to judgment.” Habakkuk declared, “The Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him” (Hab. 2:20).
 - ii. “Be silent before the Lord God!” exhorted Zephaniah, “for the day of the Lord is near” (Zeph. 1:7). Zechariah 2:13 commands, “Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord; for He is aroused from His holy habitation.”
- h. While eternal heaven has no time, the apostle John who is seeing the vision does.
 - i. Each minute of that half hour of silence must have increased the sense of agonizing suspense for John. Heaven, which had resounded with loud praises from the vast crowd of redeemed people and angels, became deathly still.
 - ii. The hour of God’s final judgment had come—the hour when the saints will be vindicated, sin punished, Satan vanquished, and Christ exalted.
 - iii. The greatest event since the Fall is about to take place and all heaven is seen waiting in suspenseful expectancy.

III. Sounding.

- a. Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. (8:2)
- b. Following the half hour of heaven's silence, John experienced a new feature of the seventh seal, namely **the seven angels who stand before God**.
- c. The use of the definite article appears to set them apart as a unique group, which some have called the "presence angels."
- d. The verb translated **stand** is in the perfect tense, which indicates that they were in the presence of God and had been there for a time.
- e. Scripture describes various ranks and orders of angels, such as cherubim (Gen. 3:24), seraphim (Isa. 6:2), archangels (1 Thess. 4:16; Jude 9), thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities (Col. 1:16), and powers (Eph. 6:12).
 - i. These seven appear to be one such order of high-ranking angels.
 - ii. Gabriel, who appeared to Zacharias and Mary, may have been one of them, since he identified himself to Zacharias as , who stands in the presence of God" (Luke 1:19).
- f. As John watched, **seven trumpets were given to** these angels, in preparation for the trumpet judgments that will shortly follow.
- g. As they did in the seal judgments (6:1, 3, 5, 6, 7) and will in the bowl judgments (16:2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 17), angels participate in the trumpet judgments.
 - i. That involvement is consistent with the teaching of Jesus that angels will play an important role in God's eschatological judgments (e.g., Matt. 13:39–41, 49–50; 16:27; 25:31).
- h. **Trumpets** are the most significant musical instruments in Scripture, being associated with many different events.

- i. In the Old Testament, trumpets were used to summon the congregation of Israel (Num. 10:2), to sound the alarm in time of war (Num. 10:9; 2 Chron. 13:12; Ezek. 33:3), at religious feasts (Num. 10:10; Ps. 81:3), to announce news (1 Sam. 13:3), to acclaim new kings (1 Kings 1:34, 39), and in worship (1 Chron. 16:6, 42; 2 Chron. 5:12–13).
 - ii. Zephaniah 1:14–16 associates trumpets with the Day of the Lord.
 - iii. The New Testament teaches that a trumpet will announce the Rapture (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16) and this chapter associates them with the judgments of that Day (8:6ff.).
- i. Each of the seven trumpets unleashes a specific judgment of greater intensity than the first six seals, but not as destructive as the seven bowls (16:1–21).
 - i. The first four trumpets destroy the earth's ecology (8:6–12), the next two produce demonic destruction of humanity (8:13; 9:1–11, 13–19), and the seventh trumpet introduces the final outpouring of God's wrath contained in the seven bowl judgments.
- j. When the first angel blew his trumpet, "a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up" (8:7).
 - i. At the sounding of the second trumpet, "a third of the sea became blood" (8:8).
 - ii. The blowing of the third trumpet destroyed "a third of the rivers and...the springs of waters" (8:10).
 - iii. When the fourth angel blew his trumpet, "a third of the sun ... moon and ... stars were struck" (8:12).
 - iv. At the sounding of the fifth trumpet, John saw demons being belched out of hell to torment humanity (9:1–6).

- v. When the sixth trumpet sounded, John saw four powerful demons “who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, [and] were released, so that they would kill a third of mankind” (9:13–15).
- vi. And with the sounding of the seventh trumpet (11:15) came the unleashing of the seven bowl judgments more severe than anything before them (16:2–21).
- k. Having been introduced and given their trumpets, the seven angels did not immediately blow them. They had to wait for other important events to transpire.

IV. **Supplication.**

- a. And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, ⁴ and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. (8:3–4)
- b. John’s attention was drawn from the seven angels with their trumpets to another figure.
- c. As he watched, **another angel came and stood at the altar** of incense (cf. 6:9).
 - i. Because of his priestly work, some identify him as the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - ii. That identification is unlikely, however, for several reasons.
 1. First, Christ is already identified in the heavenly scene as the Lamb (5:6; 6:1; 7:17), distinguishing Him from this angel.
 2. Second, while the pre-incarnate Christ appeared as the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament, Jesus is nowhere identified as an angel in the New Testament.

3. Third, the reference in verse 2 to the seven actual angels defines the meaning of the term in this context. The angel in verse 3 is described as **another** (*allos*; another of the same kind; cf. 7:2) angel like those in verse 2.
 4. Finally, everywhere He appears in Revelation, Jesus is clearly identified. He is called “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5), the son of man (1:13), the first and the last (1:17), the living One (1:18), the Son of God (2:18), “He who is holy, who is true” (3:7), “the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God” (3:14), “the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David” (5:5), the Lamb (6:1, 16; 7:17; 8:1), Faithful and True (19:11), the Word of God (19:13), and “King of Kings, and Lord of Lords” (19:16).
- iii. If He were the One at the altar, it is reasonable to assume that He would be specifically identified.
- d. John notes that the angel **came and stood at the altar** (cf. v. 5).
 - i. That altar is the heavenly counterpart to the altar of incense in the temple, which also was made with gold (Ex. 30:3).
 - ii. It was the same golden incense altar seen by Isaiah in his vision (Isa. 6:6) and by Ezekiel (cf. Ezek. 10:2).
 - iii. The further description of this altar as **before the throne** assures John’s readers that the altar of incense was the earthly counterpart to this heavenly incense altar.

- iv. That is evident because the altar of incense in the tabernacle and the temple was the nearest thing to the Holy of Holies where God's glory dwelt (Ex. 30:6).
- v. Consistent with that identification is that fact that the angel held in his hand **a golden censer**, or firepan.
- vi. In the Old Testament era, the priests would twice daily (morning and evening) take hot, fiery coals from the brazen altar (where sacrifices were offered) and transport them into the Holy Place to the incense altar (Ex. 30:7, 8; 2 Chron. 29:11; cf. 1 Kings 7:50; 2 Kings 25:15; Jer. 52:18–19).
- vii. They then ignited the incense, which rose toward heaven, representative of the prayers of the saints (cf. 5:8).
- viii. A New Testament illustration of this comes from the story of Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist: Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty,⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. (Luke 1:8–10).
- ix. While the people stood outside praying, Zacharias burned incense inside, symbolizing the ascending of those prayers to God.
- e. The angel took the **much incense** (symbolizing the multiplied prayers of God's people; 5:8; 6:9–11) that **was given to him**, perhaps by God.
- f. Though it does not say who gave the angel the incense, the verb *didōmi* (**was given**) frequently in Revelation refers to something given by God (e.g., 6:2, 4, 8, 11; 7:2, 9:1, 3, 5; 11:1, 2; 13:5, 7, 14, 15; 16:8; 19:8; 20:4).

- g. The purpose of the angel's being given the **incense** was **so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints** already rising from the altar.
 - i. Those prayers were for Satan to be destroyed, sin to be defeated, their deaths to be avenged (cf. 6:9–11), and Christ to come.
 - ii. As the angel added his incense to that already burning on the altar, the **smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand.** T
 - iii. These are undoubtedly the cries of believers in the Great Tribulation against their persecutors and all who blaspheme God and Christ in that time.
 - iv. Their prayers, affirmed by the heavenly incense which God has provided, show that He is in agreement with the cries of the saints as they come into His presence, from which the seven trumpet judgments will be released.
- h. There is a sense of anticipation as these prayers rise before God.
- i. They will shortly be answered; God's wrath and His people's prayers are connected. The question of 6:10, "How long?" is about to be answered.

V. **Storm.**

- a. **Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake (8:5)**
- b. Heaven's half hour of silence is abruptly shattered and judgment resumes as a divine firestorm bursts upon this planet.

- c. The **angel** standing before the golden incense altar **took** his **censer and**, removing the coals from the altar, **filled it with the fire of the altar**.
- d. Then, in an act that must have stunned John and the assembled multitude in heaven, the angel **threw it to the earth**.
- e. The results are catastrophic, as God's judgment falls upon the earth like a massive fireball out of the sky.
- f. The **censer ... filled with the fire of the altar**, usually linked with the prayers of God's people, becomes here a symbol of divine wrath.
- g. The angel's act of throwing it to earth reveals that God's judgment will come in direct response to those prayers. James 5:16 notes that "the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much."
- h. The cumulative effect of the prayers of innumerable righteous men will be very powerful.
- i. The immediate effects of the firestorm of wrath that bursts upon the earth are **peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake**, in direct contrast to the silence (8:1).
- j. **Peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning** are associated with the awesome majesty of God's glorious throne in 4:5; 11:19; 16:18 (cf. Ex. 19:16–19).
 - i. No details are given about the **earthquake**, but it will probably be at least as powerful as the one associated with the sixth seal (6:12).
 - ii. And following the earthquake will come the horrors of the trumpet and bowl judgments.
 - iii. By the end of those judgments, God's purging judgment of His creation will be complete.

- k. Despite all the terrifying judgments, which by this time all will acknowledge to be from God (6:15–17), and the worldwide preaching of the gospel (Matt. 24:14) by the 144,000 and others, people will still refuse to believe (cf. 9:20–21; 16:9, 11).
 - i. It seems incredible that, having experienced the fury of God’s judgment and heard the message of salvation, people will stubbornly cling to their sin.
 - ii. But the sad truth is that “the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.
 - iii. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed” (John 3:19–20).
- l. The unbelieving world rejected Jesus when He came, it rejects the life-giving message of the gospel now, and will continue to reject the truth even during the future outpouring of God’s wrath and judgment.
- m. Having gone on “sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth,” wicked people have nothing to look forward to except “a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries” (Heb. 10:26–27).
- n. But for those who repent of their sins and come to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the blessed reality is that “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life,” because “He who believes in Him is not judged” (John 3:16, 18; cf. John 5:24; Rom. 5:1; 8:1, 34).¹

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 235–243.