1. **Revelation 4:1-8:1 The Throne Room of God**

**and the Seven Seals**

1. **Questions along the way and at the end**

No chapters in the Bible have inspired so many worship songs and hymns as chapters 4 and 5.

Let me remind you of my contention about Revelation:

1. **Revelation is a 1st Century revelation of Jesus; against the Roman Empire; to the Church(es); for the purpose of worship; encouragement and hope.**

It is no wonder then that we have a chapter so dramatic and extraordinary that in any serious believer it likely evokes a response that is worship.

The first chapter with its vision of blazing son of man and the letters to the churches have been preparing for this vision of the throne room.

1. What do you imagine this door open into heaven is like?

Heaven is not a far-off distant place. It is another dimension to us right here and right now. Heaven is God’s sphere of reality.

This is not the final stage in God’s purposes. This is not a vision of the ultimate ‘heaven’, seen as the final resting place of God’s people. It is, rather, the admission of John into ‘heaven’ *as it is at the moment*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is not, as some people have supposed, anything to do with God’s people being snatched away to heaven to avoid awful events that are about to take place on earth. It is about a prophet being taken into God’s throne room so that he can see ‘behind the scenes’ and understand both what is going to take place and how it all fits together and makes sense[[2]](#footnote-2)

If you are going to believe that John is somehow representative of a church being rescued or raptured before terrible events take place you have to do so without textual evidence. In other words, you have to appeal to an eschatological system and not the Bible.

But chapters 4 and 5 really complete the introduction to the rest of the book – they lead nicely into chapters 6 and 7 and 8:1 the opening of the seals.

1. But the opening of the seals don’t exist alone either. The middle part of the book isn’t linear, it’s circular. The opening of the 7 seals, 7 trumpets.

…structured around its sequences of ‘sevens’. We have already had the seven letters to the churches. Now we are to be introduced to the seven seals, which are opened between 6:1 and 8:1. The seventh introduces a further sequence, the seven trumpets, which are blown one by one from 8:6 to 11:15. Then, at the centre of the book, we find visions which unveil the ultimate source of evil and its chief agents: the Dragon, the Beast from the Sea and the Beast from the Land—and also a vision of those who have somehow defeated these monsters (chapters 12–15). This then leads into the final sequence of seven: the seven bowls of God’s wrath, the final plagues which, like the plagues of Egypt (15:1), will be the means of judging the great tyrannical power and rescuing God’s people from its claws.[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. There are all sorts of references and reminders of Old Testament visions of heaven and events. The Prophets being taken into God’s council in 1 Kings 22; Ezekiel 1 with his vision of God’s chariot going back and forth; the rainbow taking us back to God’s promise to Noah not to destroy the world in Genesis 9.

The 24 Elders with probably representing the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 Apostles – The perfect representatives of the people of God. Their crowns revealing their co-reign with God over the Earth a royal priesthood. There is lightning and booming and shaking. Of course, when God acts then a shaking things up is to be expected.

There are the kings of various animal groups with human faces and winged!

The animals along with the Elders are worshiping!!!

**Chapter 5**

**The Scroll**

1. In heaven there was a scroll fastened with seven seals.

We need to stop here for a moment and talk about the number 7 in the Hebrew imagination and also the way the book is structured.

7 is the number of completion. The perfect number. 7 is representative of all things finished and fulfilled.

So we see many 7’s. The world is made is 7 days. 7 days a week. In the text we have 7 Spirits; 7 churches; 7 eyes; 7 seals; 7 trumpets; 7 bowels.

They are meant to be symbolic of all things, all time, the sum of, the completion, of the fulfillment, of the culmination, of all times troubles and blessings. That’s why they are in lots of 7. This all part of the Jewish imagination.

When we Hellenistic (Greek, Western, Modern) thinking people tell a story we tell it chronologically. In fact, if it is not told that way we get very frustrated. This is not always how Jews, Hebrews think and tell stories or tell of events.

It is also not how the book is structured. The whole middle part of the book from 5-19 is circular. It tells of great events 3 times with different details and complexity 7 seals, trumpets and bowels. Then each of those is separated by some intervals that appear to tell different stories but are actually there to give us the background or root causes of the events being told.

This will become clearer as we go through.

1. Who is worthy to open the scroll???????

No one.

Whenever we come to do anything we find we have mixed motives. Those seeking power in order to do good often find they are tempted by power. “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”[[4]](#footnote-4) No one is worthy. No one can fix this world of its curse or pain or suffering.

And then comes another important literary device that John uses. And this one is really important.

1. John **hears** the elder say “Look the Lion of the tribe of Judah.” But when John turns and looks he sees a slaughtered lamb.

We see it first in chapter 1 he hears a voice like a trumpet but when he looks he sees one like the son of man standing among the golden lamp stands.

He hears one thing but when he looks he sees something that is the greater and more important truth.

1. We sing “The lion and the lamb”, but it is not really. It’s a lamb. And the lamb is Jesus himself. God has made the world in such a way that his plans for the world must be executed by a human being[[5]](#footnote-5) But which human being could possibly achieve what’s required? A conquering King? Or a suffering servant?

The lion of the tribe of Judah is the conquering king of political might and power. The lamb is the self-sacrificing act of love even unto death. He is the one who wins the victory of sin, death and evil powers by a great act of sacrificial love.

The messiah was to come from the tribe of Judah. Judah was described as a lion cub.[[6]](#footnote-6) Various Apocryphal prophesies described the Messiah as a lion coming to make war on the Eagle, the Roman Empire.[[7]](#footnote-7) No Jew was likely to miss what was being said: behold the messiah.

I mentioned last week that the revelation of Jesus we find has to be the same Jesus revealed in the gospels. Some people want to claim that we get a different Jesus when he returns. This one will be a lion and will come with a sword. But that’s not what Revelation reveals. It is the same suffering servant given to us in Isaiah.

This is the same Jesus shown to us in the gospels, who eats with sinners and tax collectors; loved by children; who attracts the poor and sick and needy; who is hated and feared by the rich authorities.

He is the Lion King but the victory is won by sacrificial love of the slaughtered lamb. Victory won by humiliating violence is only ever accepted by fear. A victory won by love brings about a response of love, devotion and worship.

What do we see in response to the lamb? Worship!!!!

**Chapter 6**

1. Everyone knows that there are problems on the earth. The first four seals known as the 4 horse of apocalypse: War; violence; inequality; death.

But literature like revelation is not meant to spell it all out for you in easy-to-understand ways. It is meant to invite you to ponder and think and pray. It asks you to look not only at the actions but the root causes of events.

This chapter feels like quite a deviation from the glorious victory images of chapter 4 & 5. But…here we will find that the dark powers of evil are given their head. Things have to be exposed before they can be dealt with. Things have to come to the light before the surgeon can perform the operation.[[8]](#footnote-8)

When the lamb opens the seals we expect to find remedies for the world instead it seems to make matters worse. But evil forces and earthly kings continue to rule and lord it over their subjects. The horses are of course symbolic. John didn’t expect his readers to look out their windows and find a red horse flying by Smyrner. And these seals are not chronological but an unfolding of a sevenfold, complex reality.

This is in just the same way that the seven seals don’t happen before the trumpets and bowels to come but are an ever increasing layers to the word picture being drawn.

God’s answer is to draw out the arrogant wickedness of humans to its full extent and show that he is bringing his people safely through (chapter 7). If we look at those same problems and pains from the next angle of vision, God’s answer is to allow the forces of destruction to do their worst, so that he can then establish his kingdom fully and finally over the world (chapters 8–11). And if we take a deep breath and begin the story again from yet a third angle of vision (chapters 12 and 13), we see the full depth and horror of the problem, to which God’s answer will be to inflict on the rebellious world the equivalent of the plagues of Egypt, before finally rescuing his people and judging the dark powers that have for so long enslaved them (chapters 12–19).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Then and only then can the darkest power of all be dealt with (chapter 20). And then and only then can the new **heaven** and the new earth be established,[[10]](#footnote-10)

**The 5th and 6th Seal**

We now come to the lament of the martyrs. “How long oh Lord.” How long before justice is done?

We have explored the complexity of suffering and hope earlier in the year. Peter spent time with us trying to make sense of one of the great objections for those who don’t believe and difficulties to understand for those who do. It has always been so. The Psalms are full of laments and complaints about God not acting sooner…or at all it seems.

We discover that the Christian dead are under the alter in the heavenly temple!!! But as they complain about the injustice done to them they are asked to be patient. Patience is a major theme in the book of Revelation. In this great wrestle for power and dominance of the world God is playing the long game.

First, the evil represented by the four horsemen must reach its height with the martyrdom of yet more believers. Second, though, that martyrdom will itself be part of the means of God’s just judgment. As we shall see, this is how the lamb’s victory is worked out in practice.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In the Old Testament, language about the sun turning black and the moon becoming like blood, the stars falling from **heaven**, and so on, was regularly employed as a way of speaking about what we would call ‘earth-shattering events’—not at all meaning actual earthquakes, but rather tumultuous events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall or the smashing of the Twin Towers on September 11[[12]](#footnote-12)

…huge political and social turbulence, resulting in a scene which many ancient prophets had described (e.g. Hosea 10:8). Those we call ‘the great and the good’, and many more besides, are thrown into a sudden panic. They realize they are entirely at the mercy of the God who rules the world. Their own schemes have come to nothing; what is now to become of them?[[13]](#footnote-13)

So, this is not about the destruction of the world or else evil people rich and poor; powerful and powerless would have no reason to hide from the anger of the lamb. Of course, lambs aren’t really known for their anger or claws or teeth.

But…They are right that God—the creator God, the God we know in and through Jesus—is calling the world to account. They are wrong to imagine him as a capricious or vengeful tyrant. God is indeed angry at everything that has so horribly spoiled his wonderful world. His gaze from the throne is a deep, inexpressible mixture of sorrow and anger. But the lamb’s anger is the utter rejection, by Love incarnate, of all that is unloving. The only people who should be afraid of it are those who are determined to resist the call of love[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Chapter 7**

Yet God is holding back utter evil the angels standing at the “corners” of the earth. He is instead gathering people to himself.

Here we see another heard and saw.

1. John hears 144 000. Who this 144000 is has been the conjecture of many. It has started whole religious movements (think JW’s). They play roles in various eschatological systems (Jews coming to Jesus after a great tribulation.)

But John tells you who they are. He hears 144000 Israelites from various tribes but when he turns and looks. There is no artificial gap, no heading on the original manuscript. He turns and sees a great multitude from every nation.

This is another great mystery. The small truth and the greater. Somehow, grafted into the nation of Israel is a people of God drawn from the whole earth.

This is the 1.5 Billion Christians is the world. This is God using a chosen people to choose a people. This is nothing less than the promise to Abraham that through him all the people of the Earth would be blessed.[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. And then we get in the King James this phrase: Great Tribulation.

Who are these who have white ropes they are the ones to have come through the great tribulation.

Often modern translations will avoid that term because in certain eschatological systems it came to mean some 7 year period of great turmoil in the future. They use other terms like ordeal, suffering, trials. But this great ordeal is no other than that which has been described in the first 4 seals. War. Violence, inequality, poverty, sickness and death. In other words, as the Bible Project puts it: just another day for humanity on earth.

When the Old Testament Prophets spoke they were usually not predicting the future but addressing the four “i’s”: inequality; injustice; idolatry; and immorality. (Money; sex and power).

This is the same tribulation that so many people, so many Christians face every day in Iraq, or Gaza or Sudan or China or potentially anywhere or earth.

But,

The reality is that the creator God and the lamb have already won the victory, the victory which means that those who follow the lamb are rescued from harm. The reality is that the people who claim the lamb’s protection may well have to come through a time of great suffering, but they will then find themselves in the true reality, in God’s throne room, worshipping and serving him day and night with great, abundant and exuberant joy.[[16]](#footnote-16)

And…

The reason their clothes are white is not because they necessarily lived lives of total holiness and purity, but because the blood of the lamb, the sacrificial Passover-like death of Jesus himself, has rescued them from slavery to sin, making them able at once to stand in the very presence of the living God[[17]](#footnote-17)

Even in the midst of our greatest trial, our greatest need, God’s promise is that the lamb will become the shepherd[[18]](#footnote-18) and wipe away every tear.[[19]](#footnote-19)

This gives us an insight into the whole book. Yes, God is angry at the evil and injustice and the defaming of the earth and the lack of care about his creation and furious with sickness and death. But he is so because at his heart he is merciful and intimate. He intimately wants to wipe away every tear.

**7th Seal**

1. But when the final seal is opened there is silence. What kind of awe brings silence in heaven?

Occasionally I have been so awestruck by something that I just want to be silent and to contemplate what I just experienced. Very occasionally whole audiences respond similarly.

Sometimes in that situation, someone feeling uncomfortable with the silence breaks it with a loud comment or joke. Usually everyone else is annoyed by the interruption of their reverie.

Why don’t we take a moment of silence to reflect on God’s grandeur; the evil of the world; but God’s long plan of rescue and restoration.

1. Reflect and Questions

1. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re4.1-6a&off=5240&ctx=ters+4+and+5%2c+then%2c+~is+not+the+final+sta), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re4.1-6a&off=3100&ctx=ee+what%E2%80%99s+going+on.%0a~This+is+not%2c+as+some), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re4.1-6a&off=3955&ctx=the+book+like+this%2c+~structured+around+it), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lord Acton [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re5.1-7&off=4648&ctx=of+which+have+worked~.+God+has+made+the+w), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Genesis 49:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 2 Esdras 11 and 12, in the Apocrypha [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re6.1-8&off=3816&ctx=here+we+will+find+%E2%80%A6%0a~And+there+we+will+fi), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Tom Wright, Revelation for Everyone, For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re6.1-8&off=9209&ctx=m+(chapters+12%E2%80%9319).%0a~Then+and+only+then+c), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re6.9-17&off=5839&ctx=things+go+together.+~First%2c+the+evil+repr), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re6.9-17&off=6508&ctx=r+those+echoes.+But+~in+the+Old+Testament), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re6.9-17&off=7296&ctx=h+seal+as+a+time+of+~huge+political+and+s), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re6.9-17&off=8626&ctx=people+we+see+here.+~They+are+right+that+), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Genesis 12:3, Genesis 22:18, and Galatians 3:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re7.9-17&off=3282&ctx=into+the+nightmare.+~The+reality+is+that+), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 73–74. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re7.9-17&off=5890&ctx=+fresh+new+morning.+~The+reason+their+clo), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. John 10 and Psalm 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. A reference to the New Creation in Chapters 21 and 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)