

Revelation: The Church Triumphant Through Christ the Lamb of God

Based upon Jim McGuiggan's work on the book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation: Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls

Lesson Six

In this lesson, we will learn that ...

- Revelation can't be used to predict things still future.
 - "Sealing" something, means to protect it or keep it hidden.
 - The plagues of the trumpets and bowls symbolically say that Rome will be judged as Egypt was.
 - The measured temple says God's people can't be completely defeated.
 - The "lake of fire" is the "picture" way to speak of "total and hopeless defeat" for God's enemies.
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So far we've said that the book of Revelation was written nearly two thousand years ago and said it was dealing with things that were soon to happen because the time was near. So the book of Revelation can't be used to predict things that are supposed to be still ahead and in the very near future because the time is near.

We've said the book is written mainly in pictures and images rather than straight prose like, say, Genesis or Luke. So we aren't supposed to take the book literally. We're supposed to say, "That's what he saw, that's the image that was presented, now what do the images mean?"

Having acknowledged that the central character is God Himself we looked at some of the major characters in the book. We glanced at Rome, presented by four images (including the great City). We glanced at the people of God under four images and Christ in five descriptions. We also looked at the Devil as the Dragon and the "fallen star" that had the key of the abyss. Now, let's take a look at some of the major symbols in the book. Resist the temptation (if it exists) to think you are reading what was literally to happen. *Revelation describes the events and relationships and responses of God and people in images!* The images are mostly taken from Old Testament scripture so we have a clue as to how they are functioning. For example, when you read of "plagues" you will think of Egypt and how the plagues functioned. So here we go.

Seals and Sealing (5:1-5,9 and 7:1-8)

In ancient times even as it is today in diplomatic and other circles some documents or places are marked as "off limits" to everyone except those who are authorized to be there or to handle this or that. The more powerful or important the person who put his seal on the document to say it was his, the less likely it was that the documents (or the place) would be interfered with. Rulers might throw a Daniel in a lion's den and put their royal seal on it (Daniel 6:17, and see Matthew 27:66). To "seal up" a document was to keep it from prying or curious eyes; it kept its contents secure.

So when we come across a document (a scroll) sealed with seals we're to know it is not to be trifled with or interfered with. The only person allowed to remove seals is someone who is authorized or is powerful enough to face the consequences. This is what we find in 5:1-5,9. The "little book" (scroll) is the immediate destiny of the people of God. It is unrevealed and John is afraid it can't be opened but he hears that someone is "worthy" to "unseal" it. Picture a rolled up scroll and imagine seven clasps that hold it closed. Imagine someone tearing off one clasp and part of the scroll flapping back to reveal some of the writing that's on it. He tears off another and it flaps open even more and more until the whole contents are revealed. This is sort of what's pictured in this vision.

Remember: To seal is to mark it out as belonging to you. To seal is to forbid the unauthorized to interfere with it. To seal is both to protect and keep (in the case of writings) hidden. To tear off seals is to claim authority and (in the case of writings) it is to reveal. You'll remember that the 144,000 were sealed to mark them out as God's and the angel was told not to harm the sealed ones (7:2).

Trumpets and Bowls (8:2 and 16:1-21)

In the ancient world and in biblical literature trumpets were used to call people to attention whether that meant to bring them into an assembly or raise an alarm. We read something of the purpose of trumpet blowing in Numbers 10:1-10. Bowls were used in the Old Testament for mixing wine, or for carrying blood or oil (in connection with the sacrificial system). They'd put, let's say, wine or oil or incense in a bowl and would pour it out unto the Lord as an offering. Of course bowls were used for everyday purposes, as well, but in Revelation the stress is on activity in which God is involved so we're to see a temple, sacrificial setting.

The trumpets and bowls in Revelation introduce us to plagues that follow on the line of the plagues on Egypt. They are more intense than the plagues on Egypt and here and there you find an added element or two. *If you read Exodus chapters 7 through 10 you'll get the central thrust and function of the plagues mentioned in the book of Revelation.*

John uses quite a bit of OT plague material but he uses only as much of it as he wishes. In the OT Egypt refused to recognize "Yahweh" (Exodus 3:19-20 and 7:5) and persecuted the people of God. God sent plagues on Egypt both to appeal to them and punish them. You'll recall that each plague was a warning (a trumpet blast, so to speak) calling Egypt to obey God and let His people go free. In the book of Revelation Rome persecutes the people of God (and half the world) and God sends plagues on Rome both to warn and punish them (see Revelation 8:20-21). Like Egypt, Rome will not pay attention so the full wrath of God is outpoured (the image is of bowls full of plague being emptied on the Empire).

In both Exodus and Revelation we hear of water turned to blood, terrible locusts and body ulcers, of darkness and lightning and thunder and incredible hailstorms. Notice, too, that despite the limited punishments the oppressors will not repent and acknowledge God or His people (Exodus 8:15,19 and Revelation 9:20 & 16:9 illustrate the point).

When you read of trumpets and outpoured bowls think, "These are plagues on Rome just as there were plagues on Egypt." In Exodus the plagues were actual events while in Revelation they are *images* that carry the same message. God is against Rome as surely as He was against Egypt. You can see simply by reading Revelation that the plagues aren't literal events.

Measuring the Temple (11:1-2)

Biblical characters measured things to separate them from what isn't measured. There's nothing strange about this. We do it all the time with things from wallpaper, to curtains to room-sizes and on and on. We measure 12 feet by 12 feet and say "that's the bedroom" and then 10 feet by 12 and say "that's the kitchen." Measuring is part of the process of *separating* and giving something special significance. Ezekiel chapters 40-48 is one long measuring experience for the prophet because he watches a man measuring everything he comes across (40:2-3). In 42:20 we're told that the sanctuary area had a walled and measured square. It was measured "to separate the holy from the common." Measuring it made it different from the other areas that were not measured or were made distinct.

In Revelation 11:1-2 we have a picture of a temple. There was one word for the temple as a whole and another for the inner sanctuary, the heart of the temple ("naos"). The temple in the vision is to endure

attack from enemies and the enemies are able to tread down the outer areas but they would not be allowed to breach the inner sanctuary.

You don't need to be told that the New Covenant People of God are seen also as the temple of God (compare 1 Peter 2:5; Ephesians 2:21 and 1 Corinthians 3:16). Here we have another picture of the people of God being persecuted but protected, they suffer but they are sustained. This truth is told in the image of alien armies treading the outer courts without being able to breach the citadel. It was customary in ancient times to build temples on elevated ground. And, it was common for them to be well-constructed, fort-like structures, with strong walls so it was possible for the heart of the complex to resist if the perimeter was ever breached. Joshua took Jerusalem but it wasn't until many years later that David's general Joab took the citadel of Jerusalem from the Jebusites. During the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD the temple resisted for some time even after Jerusalem's walls were breached.

In the measuring imagery we find again the theme that runs throughout Revelation, persecution and protection, suffering and sustenance, trouble and triumph. In the vision the inner sanctuary is measured and no foreign foot treads in it though the area outside is trodden under. We are hearing that the trouble faced by the people of God is real but that it isn't the final word. The last word is with God and not the Roman legions or emperors!

The Lake of Fire (19:20 and 20:14-15)

The Bible teaches that some people will suffer eternal punishment (2 Thessalonians 1:9 and Matthew 25:46). But that's not the point in the Revelation passages cited above. The lake of fire is another symbol that intends to convey the *utter defeat and loss* suffered by God's enemies.

John borrows his imagery from the fate suffered by Sodom and Gomorrah (see Genesis 19 and Jude v.7). He also finds material in Isaiah 34:8-10, which prophesies the destruction of Edom. Isaiah isn't talking about the obliteration of the actual soil or land of Edom; he has in mind the social and political fabric of the nation (so it is with the other kingdoms like Babylon, Egypt, Assyria, and the like). When God judged Edom it wasn't turned into a literal lake of fire, but that's how the prophet described it in 34:9-10. Here's what he says: "Edom's streams will be turned into pitch, her dust into burning sulfur; her land will become blazing pitch! It will not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise forever." What literally happened to Sodom is used by Isaiah to describe the fate of Edom when God completely judged her. John borrows the same language to describe the ultimate and utter defeat of Rome and all who assist her.

The fire is called "the second death" in Revelation 20:14 and 21:8. The first death is implied in 20:4-6. There we have two kinds of people that suffered death: the followers of Christ and the supporters of the beasts.

Remember: We are dealing with pictures and images. Beasts aren't literal, chains aren't literal, dragons aren't literal and lakes of fire aren't literal. It's the *meaning* we want.

Exercises for Lesson Six

True or False?

1. In Revelation, chains, keys, and bottomless pits are literal. F
2. In the OT, bowls were used for mixing wine or carrying blood or oil. T
3. Ezekiel 40 – 48 talks a lot about measuring. T
4. John said the events of Revelation were to occur back in the first centuries. T
5. Some time in the future the oceans, seas, lakes, & rivers of the world are going to turn into blood. F
6. We measure things to separate them from other things. T
7. Revelation is written in pictures rather than in plain words like Luke or Genesis. T
8. To tear off seals is to reveal the contents. T
9. No one will suffer eternal punishment. F
10. God's people are often oppressed but they can't be completely defeated. T
11. In picture form, the defeat of Edom was described as an endlessly burning lake of fire. T
12. Some time in the future mutant locusts with scorpion tails and lion's teeth will come on the earth. F
13. The plagues in Revelation are simply images borrowed mainly from the OT plagues of Egypt. T
14. The "little book" of Revelation 5:1 tells what the people of God of John's day are about to face. T
15. The followers of Rome are seen as dying twice while Christ's followers die only once. T
16. Sealing a document meant "hands off". T
17. The plagues brought Egypt to repentance. F
18. If God seals you, you are protected. T
19. Leviticus 10:1-10 speaks of trumpets being blown. F
20. In the Bible, to measure something is to set it apart or make it holy. T

Complete the following statements.

1. So far we've said that the book of Revelation **was written nearly two thousand years ago and said it was dealing with things that were soon to happen because the time was near.** _____
2. In the measuring imagery **we find again the theme that runs throughout Revelation, persecution and protection, suffering and sustenance, trouble and triumph.** _____
3. To "seal up" a document **was to keep it from prying or curious eyes; it kept its contents secure.** _____
4. We're supposed to say, **"That's what he saw, that's the image that was presented, now what do the images mean?"** _____
5. The lake of fire is another **symbol that intends to convey the utter defeat and loss suffered by God's enemies.** _____
6. In the ancient world and in biblical literature trumpets **were used to call people to attention whether that meant to bring them into an assembly or raise an alarm.** _____
7. Beasts aren't literal, chains aren't **literal, dragons aren't literal and lakes of fire aren't literal.** _____
8. **If you read Exodus chapters 7 through 10 you'll get the central thrust and function of the plagues mentioned in the book of Revelation.** _____
9. What literally happened to Sodom **is used by Isaiah to describe the fate of Edom when God completely judged her.** _____
10. We've said the book is written **mainly in pictures and images rather than straight prose like, say, Genesis or Luke.** _____

Check off each of the following references after you have read it.

_____ Lake of fire as figure of punishment
Isaiah 34:8-10 with Revelation 20:14; 21:98

_____ The use of trumpets
Numbers 10:1-10 with Revelation 8:2

_____ Measuring the Temple
Ezekiel 42:20 with Revelation 11:1-2

_____ Plagues against Egypt as a picture of Roman punishment
Exodus chapters 7-10 with Revelation 16:1-21