



Session 7 ■ Special Interest Topic 2

Understanding the Seven Seals

The followers of Jesus inherited, in a spiritual sense, both the privileges and responsibilities of the covenant once made with Israel.

We see in Revelation 3:21 the pattern, where the last verse summarises what has been said in a vision and introduces the next scene as a snapshot. It states here that the saints (Jesus' true followers) will join Jesus on the throne and overcome, just as He overcame.

- In Revelation 5, Jesus overcomes and joins the Father on His throne.
- In Revelation 7, we will see that the saints are there but the path to get there has not been easy.
- Between chapters 5 and 7, the opening of the seals in Revelation 6 reveal how God's people overcome, enabling them to share the throne with Christ as promised.

Revelation 5 reveals the moment in time when Jesus, in the heavenly temple, approaches the throne and takes the sealed scroll as a symbol of the transference of authority and sovereignty that Satan tried to claim. He then sits on the throne of the universe at the right hand of the Father, and receives the shouts and adoration that belong only to royalty.

Traditionally, the king is regarded as both ruler and judge. By the power invested in him, he would usually proceed to punish (discipline) those who had been rebellious and bestow favours (rewards) on those who had been loyal. So this sets the scene for what happens in the rest of the Book of Revelation. Pronouncements for both rewards and punishments on the people come from the heavenly throne.

Only the Lamb is worthy to loose (break) the seals because He was slain. Therefore, whatever we are witnessing concerning the seals is the flow-on from Christ on the cross. So in Revelation, we see the Lamb opening the seals on the book of the covenant to reveal God's plans and purposes for His people.

As this happens, we are able to witness blessings and curses (rewards and punishment in a spiritual sense) as Jesus' followers now inherit the covenant once made to Israel.

The "blessings and curses" of the covenant

When Israel first went into the Promised Land, God made them stand on two mountains. Six tribes stood on Mount Gerezim to pronounce the blessings. Six tribes stood on Mount Ebal to pronounce the curses. The record of this event begins in Deuteronomy 27:12.

The prophets of the Old Testament are often spoken of as the guardians of the covenant. When Israel tended to wander away and worship other gods, the prophets would call them back by threatening them with the curses for disobedience. When they did this, they would often summarise the curses. Ezekiel 14:21 talks of the four dreadful judgments: war or sword; famine; pestilence or plague; and wild beasts. The origin of what Ezekiel is describing comes from Leviticus 26:21-26, where the curses are pronounced. Similarly, we see this in Revelation as the language of the four horsemen associated with the breaking of the first four seals.

If we enter this covenantal relationship with God by responding to Jesus knocking at the door of our hearts, there are wonderful blessings and promises:

- to sit with Him on the throne;

- to be kings and priests to reign for eternity; and
- the city and the tree of life will be ours to inherit.

On the other hand, if we become lax in our relationship with Jesus, we must also face the consequences of breaking the covenant, as Israel did. This language is reflected in the loosing of the seven seals.

Consequences of breaking the seals

As the Lamb begins to break the seals of the covenant, we find different reactions among the followers of Jesus to the covenantal offer.

First the white horse goes out. The Greek tense is a present continuous tense, which implies that this is always going on—the gospel invitation is always being given. It will keep going out and conquering the hearts of men and women. The gospel message will go from victory to victory until God decides to close the door of opportunity (see Matthew 24:14).

But there are dangers with the preaching and receiving of the good news about Jesus. Professed believers still may resist God’s working in their heart.

Jesus illustrated this with the parable of the sower in Luke 8:4-15. He said some who received the seed were like a path—they had hard hearts. They had no interest at all and the seed was taken away by the birds.

Others had hearts like shallow soil on a rock ledge. They had shallow hearts. They believed for a while; but when tested, they fall away because they had no deep roots. Other hearts were surrounded by thorns—the cares, pleasures and worries of this life—that caused the seed to be choked out.

Others had hearts like the good soil. They heard the word of God and they obeyed it. They had good, deep and fertile soil and so the seed—the message of the gospel—grew strong and produced fruit.

These messages are a warning to us: we must keep on following Jesus. We can fall away just like the parable warns.

The red horse shows how we can lose the peace that comes from knowing Jesus. We are all capable of being monsters. People who themselves have turned away from Christ can often be the ones who make life harder for those who want to keep on believing in Christ. Jesus said a man’s foes shall be of his own household.

If people continue on in this way, they will face the consequences of **the black horse**. There is a famine for the Word of God and the gospel is in danger of being lost. The black horse represents the absence of the gospel. Lack of the gospel eventually leads to soul-destroying errors.

If there is still no turning around, the next step is **the pale horse**, which is contagious disease and death. What happened to Israel can happen to the followers of Jesus, collectively or individually.

Wherever the gospel is preached, the other three horsemen follow. It is happening all the time. There is a need for all of us to look at our lives and ask: “Am I continuing to submit my life to Jesus? Am I fully following Jesus in all the ways He has opened to me in the Bible?”

The four horse and their riders portray the gospel and the escalating consequences of rejection.

As shown with the seven churches, some of these characteristics have been predominate in eras of Christian history. For example, in the Apostolic Age, the gospel initially went forth rapidly and successfully. But resistance and persecution followed. Then came an era of compromise. Rome—supposedly—became Christian under the influence of the Emperor Constantine. In turn, this led to the Dark Ages and famine for the Word of God. A type of spiritual death came over much of the Christian world.

Yet it can also be observed that this prophecy primarily points to professed Christians of any age. Every believer is subject to both the promises and curses of the covenant. The promises are a place in the New Jerusalem, to be kings and priests, and share Christ's throne. The curses are warnings found in the coming out of the horsemen; they are God's messages to try and win us back. But if we resist, the end result is the pale horse and spiritual death. Resistance reaps the covenantal curses.

Next—as with Israel in the Old Testament and in harmony with how the kings of Israel would act when they come to rule—**God turns His attention to those who are giving His people a hard time and rejected His rule over them.**

In **the fifth seal**, there is a call for justice from the oppressed of all ages. They are pictured as souls under the altar having been offered in sacrifice, crying out to God for justice. And there has been plenty to cry to God about.

The sixth seal shows God stepping into history with the return of Jesus to this world. There is a great upheaval in nature; wicked people flee from the coming of Jesus and call on the mountains and rocks to fall upon them. The question is asked of these people: "Who shall be able to stand?"

Therefore the opening of the seven seals covers the period of time from the ascension of Christ until He returns to this earth.

The opening of the seals does not reveal the contents of the scroll itself; rather, they are the consequences of Christ breaking the seals. The scroll is not open and its contents are not disclosed until all the seven seals are broken. The opening of the scroll is heralded by a mighty angel in Revelation 10:1-10 and is associated with the finishing of the preaching of the gospel in the world.

Before the seventh seal is opened in Revelation 8:1, there is a message of encouragement giving an answer to the question "Who can stand?" It presents a scene of people who will come triumphantly through a testing time ahead. Notice how they have come out of the great tribulation (see Revelation 7:14); they have not avoided it. God has not taken them away from it; rather, they have been able to stand faithfully for Christ. God has protected them because they have His seal in their foreheads (see Revelation 7:3, 4 and 9:4).