

This morning, we are continuing through the New Testament book of Revelation, the final book in the Bible. Revelation was written by John, either the apostle John who wrote the gospel and the letters 1, 2, and 3 John, or by another John, an elder in the early church. It was written late 1st century, and is primarily concerned with encouraging Christians who were undergoing persecution in the Roman Empire. The biggest key to understanding this book is to read it according to its genre. It belongs to the genre called “apocalyptic literature.” In apocalyptic literature, matters of the future or the spiritual realm are unveiled, usually through the agency of angels, in visions, lurid colors and with many crazy symbols. Apocalyptic literature is very visual. Instead of saying “Jesus is the judge” it shows Jesus with a sword coming out of mouth. Instead of saying Jesus is sovereign over his church, it shows him holding seven stars in his hand, which are the angels of the seven churches. Instead of saying that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of all the churches, he writes that they are the seven spirits before the throne. And instead of saying that the churches are lights, it depicts them as seven lampstands. In other words, do not read Revelation literally, but recognize that it is communicating in most cases familiar truths in very unique and highly visual ways.

This morning we will be in Revelation 6:1 – 8:5. Last week, we looked at John’s vision of the throne room of heaven. In chapter 5, we see a scroll in the hand of God, with seven seals holding it closed. The scroll represents the redemptive plan of God. John weeps because no one is found worthy on earth to open the scroll. No one can bring salvation to the lost children of God. There will be no justice and no hope. But then he hears a Lion and sees a Lamb looking as if it had been slain: Jesus. These chapters that we will look at this morning are the opening of the seven seals of the scroll. This passage has a lot to teach us about suffering and where God is in suffering. Try to picture it along with John.

Revelation 6:1 - 8:5 - *I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come!"*² *I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.*³ *When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!"*⁴ *Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.*⁵ *When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand.*⁶ *Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"*⁷ *When the*

Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!"⁸ I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.⁹ When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.¹⁰ They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"¹¹ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.¹² I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red,¹³ and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind.¹⁴ The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains.¹⁶ They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!"¹⁷ For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"^{NIV} **Revelation 7:1** After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree.² Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea:³ "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God."⁴ Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.⁵ From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000,⁶ from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,⁷ from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,⁸ from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.⁹ After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."¹¹ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,¹² saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power

and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" ¹³ Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes-- who are they, and where did they come from?" ¹⁴ I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. ¹⁶ Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷ For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." ^{NIV} **Revelation 8:1** When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ² And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. ³ Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. ⁴ The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. ⁵ Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

Quick summary: the chapter begins with what are commonly known as the four horsemen of the apocalypse. It is an image that draws on two OT passages: Zechariah and Ezekiel. There is debate over whether the first rider, the one on the white horse that rides out for conquest, is Jesus or something evil. In the end it doesn't really matter. Either Jesus rides out as Lord with evil and suffering close behind, or it is a false Messiah mimicking Jesus, and the four horseman just represent suffering, while Jesus is on the throne. **In the end, Jesus is Lord either way, and alongside His Lordship, suffering is happening in our broken world in the form of war, injustice, famine, and so on.** Those who suffer and are killed for their faith cry out to God for justice. God seals believers with His Holy Spirit, protecting them from spiritual harm. And in the end, He brings justice to the world, destroying all who are against Him and bringing His people to be with Him forever, in a place where there will be no more suffering.

Three implications for us:

1) If you belong to God, suffering will not destroy you but will refine you

This passage is filled with suffering – war, famine, plague, wild beasts, persecution, injustice. Satan is trying to conquer the people of God by suffering so that they lose their faith. But in ch. 7, John hears the angel say:

³ *"Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God."*

What is the seal? There was a practice in those days of marking slaves on the forehead to indicate who owned them. It is a metaphorical sign that they belong to God, and it protects them spiritually so that the suffering will not cause them to lose their salvation and the judgment will not fall on them. They are sealed so that they can persevere through suffering.

Ephesians 1:13-14 - *And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession-- to the praise of his glory.*

2 Corinthians 1:21-22 - *Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, ²² set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*

The Holy Spirit seals us, guaranteeing that no matter what happens, even if we are killed, we will live with God forever. After this sealing, in ch. 7, we read Revelation 7:4, we read *"Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel."* John hears about an army of God's people, 144,000, a military census, and then sees a vision of multitudes from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

Revelation 7:9 - *After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.*

White robes and palm branches are associated with military victory. Once again we see that they will conquer not through an actual battle but through persevering in faith in the midst of suffering and dying, just like Christ did.

The army of God's people will conquer through suffering and death. Anyone who thinks we conquer through political power or military victory is mistaken. Suffering will come upon the earth, but while the wicked will be destroyed, God's people will be refined, purified, made more holy.

Throughout the Bible, one metaphor for suffering is that of a furnace that refines:

Isaiah 48:10 - See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.

One of the things that suffering does is reveal our faith as genuine:

1 Peter 1:3-7 - Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that your faith-- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Why is the furnace such a great metaphor for our times of suffering? Because the fire in the furnace has the potential to destroy or to refine. Gold is a precious metal. If you put it through fire it may soften or melt but it will not turn to ashes. But it can be filled with impurities that can be destroyed. In the fire they burn off or rise to the surface to be skimmed off by the goldsmith. The fire tries to destroy the metal put into the fire but only succeeds in making it more pure and beautiful.

When we come to God, we are like that gold, filled with impurities. And God will allow us to go through all kinds of suffering. If we will trust in Him, it will refine us. If the goal is knowing God, then suffering and discipline and hardship do not steal from that purpose.

Tim Keller - "If your ultimate love and joy is found in the treasures of this world, then suffering will rob you of your joy and make you sadder and madder. But if your ultimate love and joy is found in God, then suffering will drive you deeper into the source of that joy."

If you are living for anything other than God, if your goal is anything else, suffering will be that much more painful, because it is stealing from you the purpose of your life. Your looks, your reputation, your success, your relationships, your health. But if our hope and joy is in God, then suffering can only refine us as it drives us deeper into our relationship with Him. As Paul put it:

Romans 8:28-29 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

2) For those who reject God, there will be a final judgment

¹² *I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, ¹³ and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. ¹⁴ The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. ¹⁶ They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! ¹⁷ For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"*

Again, this vision is symbolic. Creation is coming undone. The same language happens in the Old Testament whenever a sinful nation is being judged and destroyed, like Babylon in Isaiah 13, Edom, Egypt in other passages. And then the judgment continues in the seventh seal.

Revelation 8:1-5 - *When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ² And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. ³ Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. ⁴ The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. ⁵ Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.*

Silence is associated in the OT with divine judgment. God hears their prayers, and then He judges the wicked once and for all.

Revelation 20:13-15 - *The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.*

The **lake of fire** is the second death. ¹⁵ If anyone's name was not found written in the book **of life**, he was thrown into the **lake of fire**.

A central aspect of the second coming in the Bible is that Jesus the Messiah will return to judge the world.

Hebrews 9:27-28 - *Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*

All are destined to die once and face judgment, and Jesus will return to save those who are waiting for Him. Judgment is not a terribly popular topic, something that is probably not preached on often in American churches that would rather talk about how the Bible will improve your marriage and bank account. But if there is going to be a final judgment, then should we not consider what Jesus and the Bible have to say about it?

Many think judgment is a bad thing. As I said, judgment is not a popular topic, and is actually an embarrassing thing for many American Christians. But in the Bible, believe it or not, judgment is something to be celebrated:

Psalm 98:4-9 - *Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; ⁵ make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, ⁶ with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn-- shout for joy before the LORD, the King. ⁷ Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. ⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; ⁹ let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.*

Sing and dance because he comes to judge the earth! What does that mean? What are we missing that would cause the Psalmist to celebrate the coming judgment?

The best explanation I have heard comes from Miroslav Volf, a Yale theologian and Croatian who lived through the violence in the Balkans, wrote this in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*: “If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence – that God would not be worthy of worship... The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that violence is legitimate only when it comes from God... My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many

in the West... But it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence (results from the belief in) God's refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die... [with] other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind." For those who are used to oppression and suffering, a God of judgment is a thing to be celebrated.

As NT Wright put in his book *Surprised by Hope*: *"There will be a judgment where God will set the world right once and for all. For most people, judgment is a good thing. In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be. Faced with a world in rebellion, a world full of exploitation and wickedness, a good God must be a God of judgment."*

Not only is it good news that God will judge, it is good news that Jesus will be the judge, the man of sorrows, familiar with suffering, who loved sinners and died for them.

Because God is judge, we can call out to the Lord for justice

Romans 14:9-12 - *For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.* ¹⁰ *You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.* ¹¹ *It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'"* ¹² *So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God*

Who are you to judge your neighbor? If there is no God, then justice is up to you. If people can steal and kill and rape and cheat and lie and get away with it in the end, then we must put them in their place. But if God will sort it out in the end, then we can trust Him to judge. Christians who believe in a God who will judge in the end should be the most loving people.

God will judge. Do you know Him? This salvation has nothing to do with your resume, but everything to do with whether or not you have repented of your sins and turned to faith in Christ, trusting Him for your salvation.

John 3:36 - *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."*

Repent and believe in Jesus:

2 Peter 3:7-9 - *By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. ⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

3) For those who belong to God, there will be an end to suffering

It can feel as if there will be no end to the suffering:

⁹ *When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. ¹⁰ They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" ¹¹ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.*

They are under the altar. Emphasizes the sacrificial nature of their suffering, but likely also the protection of God over their soul. They cry out to God to vindicate His reputation and His people. They are given white robes – purity from their persevering faith.

But there will be an end to the suffering one day:

⁹ *After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." ¹¹ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" ¹³ Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes-- who are they, and where did they come from?" ¹⁴ I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood*

of the Lamb. ¹⁵ Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. ¹⁶ Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷ For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

No more suffering. They are in the presence of the Lord. No more suffering, no more tears. Eternal life and healing, eternal fellowship with God and Christ.

Revelation 21:1-5 - *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." ⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

Cling to the Lord through suffering and let Him refine you into the man or woman He has created you to be. In the end, suffering will be destroyed and we will be with Him forever.