

SCENE 2 : Six seals are broken

¹Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, 'Come!'⁷

²I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came forth from victory that he might conquer.

When John speaks of 'seeing', he is referring primarily to a faith-inspired insight (see 1:12). The Lamb is the crucified and risen Christ (see 5:6) who alone has the power to unlock the meaning of history (see 5:1). In ways that are intelligible and yet transcend human comprehension (hence the 'living creatures'), we are invited to examine history in the light of revelation.¹

John's imagery draws on that of Zechariah who uses the different coloured horses symbolically to represent the different ways in which God's judgment is brought to bear on history:

And again I looked up and saw four chariots coming out from between two mountains - mountains of bronze.

The first chariot had red horses, the second chariot black horses, the third chariot white horses, and the fourth chariot dappled gray horses.

Then I said to the angel who talked with me, 'What are these, my lord?'

The angel answered me,

These are the four winds of heaven going out, after presenting themselves to the Lord of all the earth.

The chariot with the black horses go toward the north country,

the white ones go toward the west country,

and the dappled ones go toward the south country'.

When the steeds came out, they were impatient to get off and patrol the earth. And he said,

'Go, patrol the earth'. So they patrolled the earth..

– Zechariah 6:1-7 (also 1:8-10).

John shapes these symbols to his own purposes by placing at their head the white horse and its rider who has 'come from victory that he might conquer.' As we have seen (1:14), white directs our attention to the risen Christ and the radiant luminosity of his exalted state. The white horse, therefore, stands for the dominant influence of Christ in history. He has come from the victory of his resurrection, and, whatever other forces are at work in history - forces that cause the catastrophes symbolised by the other three horses - his is the dominant force. He has conquered and is still victorious. No power can overcome him.

¹For the significance of 'voice', see Apocalypse 1:10; for 'thunder', see Apocalypse 4:5; for the 'living creatures', see Apocalypse 4:6.

The second horse is red, symbolic of war and bloodshed, the violence that underpins Roman rule. The causes of war are to be sought in human injustice. But John, following the prophetic tradition, looks beyond the empirical data of our human experience to the truth that God can bring good even out of the sinful reality of war. This raises the complex question of punishment for sin, and its relationship to the divine will. We shall return to this question shortly. Here John recognises that, while the cause of war is to be found in human sin, it is not outside the influence of divine providence.

The third horse is black. The rider carries scales and has the power to organise prices in such a way as to keep the poor in a state of oppression. They cannot afford wheat and have to be content with the less nourishing barley. At the same time those who control exchange make sure that the rich can enjoy luxury items (oil and wine) to their heart's content. Roman prosperity depended, too, on the manipulation of markets. Such blatant injustice is frequently the subject of condemnation by the prophets. Typical is the following from Amos:

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying: 'When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will practice deceit with false scales, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.

– Amos 8:4-6

³When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creatures call out, 'Come!'
⁴And out came another horse, *fiery* red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.

⁵When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, 'Come!' I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, ⁶and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, 'A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay; but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!'

⁷When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, 'Come!' ⁸I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.

⁹When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar, *alive*, those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; ¹⁰they cried out with a loud voice, 'Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?'

¹¹They were each given a white robe and told to rest a *short time*, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

The pale green of the fourth horse symbolises the fading of life, and so mortality, reminding us of the passage of Isaiah:

All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it.

– Isaiah 40:6

Together, the red, black and pale green horses and their riders symbolise the terrors of war, injustice, and death upon which the apparent wealth and security of the Roman empire (including that of the subject cities of Asia) rested.



With the opening of the fifth seal, John shifts his focus to God's vindication of the martyrs and God's judgment of their oppressors. Those who have given their lives in witness to Christ have made the supreme sacrifice; hence the association with the altar. They are seen here alive, dressed in white, sharing in the glory of the exalted Christ (see 1:14). Their cry to be vindicated by God's judgment is traditional.¹

In stating that God's judgment will be manifest in a 'short time', John is not measuring chronological time. He is stressing the certainty of vindication. We are reminded of Jesus' words:

Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.

– Luke 18:7-8

God is love. This does not mean that those who oppress others and those who benefit from this oppression do so without suffering the consequences of their choices. It matters what we do, and evil actions have effects which we cannot pretend away. Justice is assured. It is not achieved, however, by opposing evil with its own methods. It is to be left to God. The blood of the martyrs will be vindicated.

¹'He will avenge the blood of his children' (Deuteronomy 32:43). Also Psalm 79:10 and 2 Kings 9:7.

With the opening of the sixth seal, seven symbols are used to describe the punishment that must come upon those who attempt to exercise power without regard to God's will.

The first: earthquake, symbolising the collapse of all man-made power structures. The area of Asia Minor was well known for its earthquakes. The catastrophic earthquake which destroyed much of Sardis in 17AD was said by Pliny to be the worst disaster in living memory. Laodicea required considerable rebuilding after an earthquake in 60AD.

The second: the sun becoming black as sackcloth, symbolising the darkness suffered by all who seek a source of enlightenment other than God's self-revelation in Christ. The imagery is traditional: 'I clothe the heavens with blackness, and make sackcloth their covering' (Isaiah 50:3). 'The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes' (Joel 2:31).

The third: the full moon becoming like blood.¹ The imperial cult, celebrated at the full moon, will not bring the hoped for prosperity, but only more violence.

The fourth: stars falling to the earth. Stars belong to the supra-terrestrial world: they should therefore participate in the glory of God. Demons were imagined as fallen angels, as stars which had fallen from the heavens to the earth, where they cause disruption. So it will be with the power of Rome.

The fifth: the sky made to vanish like a scroll. There is nothing separating the human from the transcendent, and so everyone is open before God's judgment.²

The sixth: every mountain removed. People were accustomed to flee to the mountains to seek refuge against the disaster of a conquering army. No such flight is possible from God's judgment.

The seventh: every island removed. In Jewish literature, the islands were inhabited by foreigners. They were thought of as distant, unreachable and mysterious. Even these will not provide a haven against God's inevitable judgment.

¹Compare: 'The moon will be turned wholly into blood' (Testament of Moses, 10:5).

²The skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall wither, like a leaf withering on a vine' (Isaiah 34:4).

¹²When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood,
¹³and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.
¹⁴the sky was made to vanish like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

The sixth seal

¹⁵Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains ¹⁶calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; ¹⁷for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?'

That God's judgment is universal is symbolised by the seven groups mentioned by John. The accent is on the powerful: those responsible for oppression in its most obvious forms: the kings of the earth¹ (the Roman authorities and the local princes who exercise power in the name of Rome); the magnates; the generals; the rich; the powerful. The final category includes all who are responsible for oppression whether they be slaves or free.

When those responsible for the injustices on our earth are brought face to face with God's judgment, despair takes hold of them. They realise their folly and have to face up to the consequences of their sinful behaviour. John alludes to a passage from Isaiah, the translation of which is not easy, but which seems to be a call to people to flee to God (symbolised by the Rock):

Go to the Rock, stay hidden in the dust, in awe of Yahweh, before the magnitude of his glory when he arises to make the earth quake.

– Isaiah 2:10 = 2:19

In the passage in the Apocalypse, by contrast, it is too late for repentance, as they have obstinately refused to turn to God. Now they can only cry, using the words of the prophet Hosea:

They (the idolaters) shall say to the mountains, Cover us! and to the hills, Fall on us!

– Hosea 10:8 = Luke 23:30

John introduces a concept, the understanding of which is critical for the whole of the Apocalypse. He speaks of the wrath of God, seated on the throne (see 4:2), and the wrath of the exalted Christ, the Lamb (see 5:6). How are we to understand this wrath? Are we to understand the evil effects of sin upon the sinner as a punishment of an angry God, or an angry Christ? What is the great day of wrath?

When the Bible says that God is just, it means that we can be certain that God always acts according to who God is. God never acts contrary to his nature. This leads to the question: 'Who, then, is God?' 'What can we know about God from the way he has revealed himself in history?'

¹Always a negative term in the Apocalypse See 1:5; 19:18.

John sums up the consistent message of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, when he writes: ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8). God is ‘the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, *persistent in passionate concern*, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness’ (Exodus 34:6).¹

Everything we know about God must be understood in this basic perspective. When we say that God is just we are saying that God always acts according to God’s faithful love:

Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favourable? Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?

– Psalm 77:7-9

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

– Lamentations 3:22-23

Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true.

– Romans 3:4

The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

– Romans 11:29

To say, then, that God is just, is to recognise that God’s will is always loving, that everything God does gives expression to this love, and that God’s love is offered unconditionally. The implication is that nothing we do can change this fact: a truth which the cross powerfully symbolises.

Shifting our focus from God to us we come to the enigma of sin, to the fact that we humans use our limited freedom to act in ways that attempt to satisfy a more superficial need by frustrating a more central one. We act against nature, against right order, against God’s will. We withdraw ourselves from what we most long for and need: God’s unconditional love. Unlike God, we act unjustly.

Traditional wisdom recognises that to sin one needs knowledge and freedom. It is obvious that both can in some circumstances be entirely absent. It is obvious also that often they are present only in a very defective way. This makes it difficult to be accurate in our judgment concerning sin in our own case, and explains Jesus’ injunction that we are not to sit in judgment upon others. At the same time we know that we have a measure of freedom and that we do at times choose knowingly to act contrary to what we judge to be right. We sin.

The injustice committed in our world has evil effects on the people acting unjustly and on those whom their actions affect. Clearly, it matters how we behave. Furthermore, the truth that God is love in no way distorts God’s judgment. We might deceive ourselves. We cannot deceive God. If we are acting unjustly, that is the way God sees it and God cannot pretend things are otherwise.

¹This refrain is repeated often throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, for it is cherished as almost a definition of who God is: Numbers 14:18; Psalm 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Nehemiah 9:17; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2.

The ‘anger of God’

This is a radically important idea. Of its nature, love is not something that is forced on others. In the story of the prodigal son, the father continues to love the boy, but this does not stop the boy from experiencing the pig yard. God’s love is unconditionally offered, but, like all love, its reception is conditional on our response. God’s love brings about communion with God, only if we choose to accept it. If we reject God’s love, if we turn our back on God’s wisdom and God’s will, and act unjustly, we reject his offered love and certain consequences follow.

The Bible tends to look on the effects of sin as ‘punishment’, but it is important to recognise that the punishment is, in the final analysis, self-inflicted. Jeremiah expresses this truth well:

Your wickedness will punish you, and your apostasies will convict you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God.

– Jeremiah 2:19

The problem comes when we speak of such punishment as ‘divine’, as the ‘punishment of God’. We must not think of God as the one who inflicts the punishment. It is our sin which causes the evil, not God. The punishment is called ‘divine’ because of the ways in which it is related to God. First of all, it is God who is the author of life and of the order against which sin rebels. Secondly, all God’s creative action and inspiration moves us to act justly. To sin is to go contrary to this inspiration, and the fundamental effect of sin is to separate us from the unconditional love being offered by God. What is experienced is a separation from divine communion, and so the ‘punishment’ profoundly affects our relationship with God.

To say that God is just is to say that God is always faithful to his love. It is to say also, that God’s judgments are necessarily true. There is great joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. There is great sadness in heaven over one sinner who refuses to repent. Either way, God judges things the way they are.

I the Lord test the mind and search the heart,
to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings.

– Jeremiah 17:10¹

Cast away from you all the transgressions
which you have committed against me,
and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!
Why will you die, O house of Israel?
For I have no pleasure in the death of any one,
says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

– Ezekiel 18:31-32

If favour is shown to the wicked,
they do not learn righteousness;
in the land of uprightness they deal perversely
and do not see the majesty of the Lord.

– Isaiah 26:10²

¹See Jeremiah.21:14; Psalm 62:12; Hosea 12:3; Isaiah 59:17; Ezekiel 33:20.

²See Isaiah 59:10; Psalm 7:12; Jeremiah 3:5.

The expression ‘anger of God’ can be understood only when we keep in focus the truth that God is love, and that the evil effects of sin are just that, and not an arbitrary punishment inflicted on the sinner by God.

It is important to distinguish clearly between two quite distinct forms of what we call anger. There is the anger of losing one’s temper. It is very common, and comes from a failure in patience. It is essentially self-centred. There is also a passionate concern when we are so caring of another that our whole being explodes in a determination that they not hurt themselves or hurt others. It is this second type of anger only that is predicated of God, who is passionately concerned for justice, and passionately determined to redeem the oppressed.

Since it is God who upholds the created order, God is frequently spoken of as the one who sees that the evil effects of human sin do occur.

Many of the references in the Old Testament to divine anger reflect the experience of the fall of Jerusalem, seen by the authors of the Law and by Jeremiah and Ezekiel and the other prophets of the day, as the result of human sin, and therefore as ‘divine punishment’. However two truths must not be forgotten.

The first truth is expressed powerfully in the psalm:

I will punish their transgression with the rod
and their iniquity with scourges;
but I will not remove from him my steadfast love,
or be false to my faithfulness.

– Psalm 89:32-33

Sin has its evil effects, and while the sin lasts so do its effects. But God’s unconditional love stands.

The second truth is that God uses the punishment itself as an instrument to draw the sinner back to his love. If the sinner refuses this offer, he has only himself to blame. This is expressed clearly by Paul:

Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and persistent concern? Do you not realise that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.

– Romans 2:4-5

The expression ‘Day of the Lord’ is used in the Old Testament for any time in which things are revealed in their true light: any time when the judgment of God is manifest. From the point of view of the vindication of the just and the punishment of the unjust, such a day is called a ‘day of wrath’:

The day of the Lord is great; terrible indeed - who can endure it?

– Joel 2:11

The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast ... a day of wrath.

– Zephaniah 1:14-15

The 'anger of God'

Good and evil are revealed only imperfectly in our history. It is believed that, because God is just, ultimately there will be a final, great Day of the Lord, on which all will be made clear: the good will be finally vindicated, and 'There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil' (Romans 2:9). Jesus associated himself closely with the judgment of God. He felt in his heart the passionate concern of God to love sinners into changing their ways. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, he knew that human behaviour matters, and that sin has evil effects which he wanted no one to suffer. He gave his life 'for the *casting away* of sins' (Matthew 26:28). He warned people of the consequences of obstinately refusing divine communion:

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evil-doers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

– Matthew 13:41-42¹

Then the King will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me' ... and they will go away into eternal punishment.

– Matthew 25:41-43,46

Paul echoes the teaching of Jesus when he writes:

Those who do not know God and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus ... will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

– 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9

Christ shares in God's passionate concern for justice. The 'great day of their wrath' (Apocalypse 6:17) is therefore truly a day of the 'wrath of the Lamb' (6:16). He forgave those who crucified him, and he is willing to forgive all who cause oppression. But we must accept this offer. We must cease from our oppression. We must turn to God and be saved. If not, God's just judgment must be revealed, when we will reap the fruit of our actions.



Six seals have been broken. There is, however, still one seal preventing us from penetrating to a full understanding of the meaning of history. So far we have been told that we cannot understand it unless we grasp the truth that the effects of evil (seals two, three and four) are transcended by the influence of the exalted Christ (seal one). We must also realise that the passionate concern of God for truth means that the cry of the martyrs will certainly be heard (seal five) and that evil will be conquered (seal six). Before breaking the final seal, and with his focus still upon history, John reassures his readers that those consecrated to Christ need have no fear.

¹ See also Matthew 5:29-30; 8:12; 18:7-9; 22:13; 25:30.

INTERLUDE : Those under divine protection

There are four angels in this scene. Four symbolises the whole extent of earthly reality (see 4:6). Angels symbolise divine activity coming into the world from the transcendent (see 1:20). Traditionally, Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, because of the size of their tribes, are mentioned separately. This leads either to the listing of thirteen tribes¹ or to the omitting of one or other in order to keep the number at twelve.² The list in Revelation includes Joseph, adds Manasseh and omits Dan.

The number twelve is more significant than the precise naming of the tribal territories. The twelve signs of the zodiac (whence the twelve lunar months in the traditional calendar) influenced the use of twelve to symbolise heavenly comprehensiveness.

The number one hundred and forty-four³ is, of course, twelve multiplied by twelve. It represents a combination of the twelve tribes of the Old Testament and the twelve apostles of the New,⁴ and so is used here as a symbol of the Christian Church, made up of Jews and Gentiles.

The number one thousand symbolises the totality which is proper to the divine sphere, and therefore the fulness of divine blessing, and so the fulness of the action of the glorified Christ prior to the end.⁵

¹Ezekiel 48.

²Numbers 1:20-43 omits Levi; Deuteronomy 33:6ff omits Simeon and Zebulun.

³Found also in Apocalypse 21:17.

⁴We have already seen another combination in the twenty-four elders. See Apocalypse 4:4..

⁵See Apocalypse 20:2ff.

¹After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind could blow on earth or sea or against any tree.

²I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea,

³saying, 'Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads'.

⁴And I heard the number of those who were sealed, a hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel: ⁵from the tribe of Judah twelve thousand sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand, ⁶from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand, ⁷from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand, ⁸from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand, from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand sealed.

Servants of the Lord

That John is referring to the present situation on earth is underlined when, in place of the traditional expression ‘the four winds of the heavens’,¹ he speaks of the ‘four winds of the earth’ (7:1). The one hundred and forty-four thousand, therefore, symbolises the totality of Jews and Gentiles who belong to Christ now on earth who are associated with his bringing about the kingdom in this time before the end: those whom Paul calls ‘the Israel of God’ (Galatians 6:16).

God is portrayed as holding judgment back, that is to say, of patiently living with the terrible effects of the evil being perpetrated on the earth, till those who are faithful disciples of his Son receive his seal upon their foreheads.² This seal indicates that they have given themselves, like slaves, body and soul, heart and mind, to God’s service. They belong to him and he will protect them against evil.

We are reminded of the blood on the doorposts, which marked out those who were to be liberated at the Exodus.³ See also Ezekiel:

Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark upon the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.

– Ezekiel 9:4

The message of divine protection and the seal to ensure it come ‘from the rising of the sun’ (7:2), that is, from the east, from the risen Christ, their source of hope.⁴ Luke uses this imagery to introduce the birth of Christ:

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

– Luke 1:78-79

¹Jeremiah 49:36 and Daniel 7:2.

²The expression is found also in Apocalypse 3:12; 14:1; 22:4.

³Exodus 12:7-14.

⁴Compare Isaiah 41:25.