

INTRODUCTION

Revelation 4:1-11

As we continue in our journey through Revelation; our scene opens in chapter four and it is magnificent beyond imagination. It glimpses into the glory of God. John doesn't try to reduce God into a physical form we'd understand. He simply looks from a reverent distance and says, God is like... He is like the three most precious stones of the ancient world. The softest voice is like the blast of a trumpet, the loudest like peals of thunder. There is an emerald rainbow and lightning reflecting off of something that looks like a sea of crystal clear glass.

Pure glass in the ancient world was not like today. Any glass that was completely clear was worth more than gold, and here was a sea of it. It is awesome imagery of reverence, power, and value beyond imagination. And it is in this place that the story of the end begins to unfold.

There's a lot going on, so for the sake of time, we are going to concentrate on only two objects. The first being...

QUESTIONS

WHAT IMAGE (AND QUALITIES) OF GOD IS SET UP IN CHAPTER FOUR

WHY DO YOU THINK JOHN DOES THIS BEFORE LAUNCHING INTO THE EVENTS TO COME?

1. THE SCROLL

Revelation 5

1. And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a **scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals.**
2. Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?"

These two verses are loaded with implications. The ancient scroll was a tool to communicate important ideas. The paper was made out of papyrus reed that was beaten into sheets of ten by eight inches. The writing was done in three inch columns and long works had the sheets attached together. There were two rollers, the sheets were taken up with the left hand and unrolled by the right. Books like Jude or Philemon would take one sheet. Romans would be a roll 11 ½ feet long, Revelation would be 15 feet long.

The grain on the front side ran horizontal and it was easiest to write on. The backside grain went vertical and was somewhat harder to write on. However, since papyrus was so expensive, long works would be written on the front and the back to save paper.

So far we know two things. God had something very important to communicate; and it was a great deal of information.

It was sealed. A seal on a scroll often meant communication from royalty and it was meant only for the authorized. On this scroll there were seven seals. We know that seven is the infinite or countless number. That is a lot of seals! The imagery for the original hearers was clear: This communication was ***from the King and it was a profound secret*** to no one but the elect.

3. And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was ***able to open the scroll,*** or to look at it.

4. ***So I wept much,*** because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it.

Consider this for a moment: John had seen some real adversity. He had survived the persecution of Jerusalem. He faced the darkness of pagan cultures. He had seen glories of heaven that couldn't even be expressed in human language. ***And at the sight of this scroll, he cries!*** How important must this information be? How great the desire to read it?

5. But one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. Behold, the ***Lion of the tribe of Judah,*** the Root of David, has ***prevailed to open the scroll*** and to loose its seven seals."

7. Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.

...

9. And ***they sang a new song,*** saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,

There is something very significant about this "new song." Normally Greek would use the word "neos"; *something new in point of time*. But the word used is "kainos" which means not only new in time, but quality. Whatever was in the scroll caused heaven and earth to ***sing a type of song that had never been heard before in all the history of creation.***

There is a ***second point of imagery*** that comes into play, this time, it's ***Roman***. It was customary for a Roman will to be sealed with seven seals, signed by seven witnesses. In essence, this scroll is the will and testament of God, Himself. But the opening of this scroll ***comes with a price***. The price is the unleashing of our second focus:

QUESTIONS

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS WRITTEN ON THE SCROLL?

WHY DID JOHN WEEP (BEYOND THE FACT IT COULDN'T BE OPENED)?

WHAT IS "THE NEW SONG"?

2. THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Before we go on, there's a few thing we need to know about these horsemen. First, ***this is not original imagery***, it is rooted in Judaism. When Israel was about to fall the first time, Zechariah saw the vision of four horsemen (Zech.6:1-8). They were the vengeance of God on the nations that oppressed His people.

The horsemen don't speak of any specific people but rather, the ***forces of nature*** brought to bear by God. The four winds are the agents of destruction. In fact, if we look closely, it involves human nature.

And like the chapters before it, the events are **rooted in actual and literal history**.

Rev 6

2. And I looked, and behold, a ***white horse***. And he who sat on it ***had a bow***; and a ***crown*** was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

The white horse and rider doesn't symbolize Christ here. It is the woe of ***military conquest***. In Roman custom, a military conqueror would ride a chariot drawn by white horses.

And in the Old Testament, the bow was the symbol of military power. Fresh in the minds of the readers would be an event that was unprecedented. A Roman army surrendered. It was to the Parthians. The Parthians rode white horses and were legendary in their archery skills. In fact, to this day there is a term "Parthian shot" which means ***a final devastating blow for which there is no defense***.

And the word for crown used here, isn't a royal crown, but the laurel crown worn in victory. The bottom line is this: We are talking about the unleashing of human nature. It results in ***wars so devastating; there is no defense or escape***.

It makes me think of what ***we are unleashing on each other now***, and weapons we are developing. In the Middle East, we dropped "daisy cutters" capable of blowing up people hiding in caves and deeply buried bunkers. They are working on smart ammunition that actually tracks the person at which it is aimed. There are biological weapons more lethal than the black plague; insidious and inescapable. -And of course, nuclear weapons. The "Parthian shot" is in the hands of man today. It's just a question of when.

4. And another ***horse, fiery red***, went out. And it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that ***people should kill one another***; and there was given to him a great sword.

This is beyond the insanity of war; it is the ***burning hatred of prejudice and oppression***. It was very much alive in John's time. In the time of Herod the Great, there were more than 100,000 men who died in failed uprisings. In 61 AD, the uprising of Britain under Queen Boadicea saw the death of 150,000 men against the Romans. What the red horse has unleashed is the destructive nature of the human heart. This would resonate with any believer of Jewish background. ***The Jewish picture of the end time said it would come with the disintegration of all human relationships***.

QUESTIONS

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE WHITE AND RED HORSE?

WHAT EVENTS IN CURRENT HISTORY MIGHT FIT THEM?

5. When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come and see." And I looked, and behold, a **black horse**, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand.

6. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "**A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine.**"

We read verse six and it means basically nothing to us. But it was a loaded message to the original readers. In this time, **there were a number of famines that happened just like this.**

The roots of the olive trees and the vineyards went deeper than the grain. So there were droughts that damaged the grain but basically left the trees untouched. Wheat was the most expensive, so a man could spend a whole day's wage (a denarius). Barely was cheaper, so for a day's wage he would get a little more to feed his family. But then, there was no money for anything else.

Olive oil and wine still remained in relative abundance; but they were **items of luxury**. During the rule of Emperor Domitian there was this kind of drought. At first he ordered the vineyards to be cut back. There was such an outcry from the rich land owners that he reversed the order and said it was unlawful to cut back any vineyard. So what resulted was **famine alongside luxury**. Life remained good; for those with money.

Imagine the emotions of watching your family starve as others went on in total luxury! That is the meaning of this sentence. It is talking about a dark form of **social inequality**.

Again, here we have something rooted in actual history, but it is also a dark cloud on our own horizon. Consider this excerpt from New York University.

Polarization of American Society, Berry Bluestone

For much of America, the Glory days came to an end in the early 1970s. For more than two decades now, real wages in America have been stagnating or falling, the distributions of earnings and income have become increasingly unequal, and the bulk of financial wealth has been accumulating among fewer and fewer families. Since 1973, real average weekly earnings for the more than eighty percent of the workforce who are counted as production or nonsupervisory workers have fallen by 19 percent; ... Income gains have gone primarily to the already well-off, while those at the bottom of the income distribution have sustained real losses.

With an ever widening gulf between the haves and have-nots, it's not hard to envision this happening in our own time.

8. And I looked, and behold, a **pale horse**. And the name of him who sat on it was **Death**, and Hades followed with him. And power was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth.

Again, the imagery is rooted in Jewish history. Ezekiel told of the "four severe judgments" (*Ezek. 14:21*) against a disobedient and spiritually bankrupt Jerusalem, 700 years earlier. The crushing of Jerusalem by Babylon is literal history. Especially to Jewish believers, the pale horse was not just an abstract symbol. It was the real consequences of sin, which no man or nation can escape.

As each seal is opened and each judgment falls, readers often concentrate on the wrath of God. **But what we fail to see is what God is actually unleashing.** He is unleashing the darkness we have been growing since the time of Adam. In short, **God unleashes mankind upon itself.** It is horrible and irrefutable justice.

QUESTIONS

CAN YOU THINK OF SOME GLARING AREAS OF INEQUALITY?

WHAT MECHANISMS OF INEQUALITY MAY PLAY A BIG PART IN THE FUTURE?

Let's wind down on a happier note with chapter seven.

Rev 7

2. Then I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea,

3. saying, "Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees **till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.**"

Once again, the seal on the forehead is not new imagery. Ezekiel is prophesying of the immanent destruction of Jerusalem.

Ezek 9

4. and the Lord said to him, "Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it."

There would be a seal on the foreheads of the true followers and they would not suffer the coming destruction. It was powerful imagery, but it was symbolic for Ezekiel and it is symbolic here. If it is not a literal seal and not the literal foreheads, what do they stand for? Let's take a look:

- **The Seal**

It was not unique to Israel, but to the entire ancient world. In short; it was the mark of the king, and it visibly identified the king's property. The Apostle Paul borrowed this imagery all the time when he told Christ-followers they were sealed by the Holy Spirit. If we are sealed, it will show visibly in the way we live. ...How about...

QUESTIONS

IN YOUR OWN WORDS, WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE "SEALED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT?"

DESCRIBE WHAT SUCH A PERSON WOULD BE LIKE?

- **The Forehead**

Here's a quick survey of three verses:

Jeremiah 3

3. Therefore the showers have been withheld, and there has been no latter rain. You have had a harlot's forehead; you refuse to be ashamed.

The forehead is the front of the brain; it symbolizes the way we reason, view, and ultimately value things in life. It directs our conscience and our destiny.

Ezekiel 3

8. "Behold, I have made your face strong against their faces, and your forehead strong against their foreheads.

Going right along with this, the forehead symbolizes our will.

Exodus 28

38. "So it shall be on Aaron's forehead, that Aaron may bear the iniquity of the holy things which the children of Israel hallow in all their holy gifts; and it shall always be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord.

The third quality is a logical progression. As we understand, reason, and will; we are responsible. We are accountable for what we have the mind to do... it is on our heads.

Chapter seven talks about the 12 of the 12. It talks specifically of the tribes of Israel and does not imply this symbolizes any other people. It is the true remnant of Israel. They are not Jehovah Witnesses or any other spiritualized group. If we have any doubt:

Rev 7

9. **After** these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands,

If we put it all together- the Spirit of God has made a tangible mark on how they reason, value, and will to use their lives. They are in white robes which in ancient terms,

symbolizes the right to approach God. The accountability of their lives is on them, which is a positive thing, since they remained righteous.

The number 12 is literal, the tribes are mentioned in a specific and literal way; as are the gentile Christians. And yet, the multiple of 12 is used, 144,000, evoking an image of *the chosen*. The seal and the forehead are allegories to convey understood concepts. For the reader whose head is where the writer is, it is natural to discern symbol from literal. But whatever the case, they are tools to support the reality of what is coming.

QUESTIONS

DO YOU THINK THE FOREHEAD IS LITERAL OR FIGURATIVE?

IN YOUR OWN WORDS, WHAT DOES THE FOREHEAD SYMBOLIZE?

CONCLUSION

There's a whole lot more we could address through these verses. But the objective is not to explain every point, it is to develop an approach to this revelation.

The warnings are as real as history itself. They make perfect sense in the imagery of the time. And yet, as Scripture does, it is a foreshadow of things still to come.

In these warnings there is a mixture of the brutal side of nature mingled with the dark side of human nature. **Think about what happened in New Orleans.** There was misery from the forces of nature, but there was also misery from rape gangs, lootings, even a few shooting at the very people trying to rescue them.

The **goodness of human nature is pretty fragile when left to itself.** The message is; there is **a God of such holy glory**, that he defies the power of words. And that **God is our hope.**

Things will get rough, but that's the natural course of things. But for those of us who endure and rely on the Spirit of this indescribable God; there is indescribable reward. ...**IF WE ENDURE.**

With that in mind; I'm going to leave you with a hard question:

In a church culture where people get **bent out of shape over a few displeasing words.** When the mentality is **spiritual consumerism:** *What services can you give me if I come here?*

When it is **uncommon to connect with God** on a daily basis...

When we extol God as good; because He gives us good stuff, *not* because we stand in awe of His nature... **are we really in a position where we can endure?**

May God root in us; that kind of faith!

QUESTIONS

**HOW WOULD YOU SUMMARIZE THE MEANING OF THE CHAPTERS WE COVERED?
(CHAPTERS 4 THROUGH 7)**