

Book of Revelation

Week 3 — God's edicts are bound-up! (Revelation 5–7)



Introduction

What comes to mind when you think of the Book of Revelation? The gospel story, anyone?

Tonight we'll see the most graphic presentation of the gospel anywhere in the Bible. The Book of Revelation is about the gospel—the good news of Jesus, who he is, and what he has done.

So far, we've seen Jesus as our resurrected ruler (Revelation 1), issuing edicts to his servants (Revelation 2 – 3). John was invited to see how things work in Heaven which is characterized by God's throne (Revelation 4).

God reigns in heaven, but here on earth it doesn't always feel like that. So much is wrong here.

In the beginning, he issued decrees about how things were to be.

And it was so. And God said it was good.

Day after day, that's how he set up his earthly realm to be:

Genesis 1	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
God said	1:3	1:6	1:9, 11	1:14	1:20	1:26, 28, 29
It was so		1:7	1:9, 12	1:15		1:30
It was good			1:10	1:18	1:21	1:31 (very)

But something is wrong. The world is not operating as God decreed.

Horrific things are happening:

- Humans try to grasp God's power over the world and conquer each other.
- We kill each other with devastating wars.
- People are starving.
- Death stalks humanity.
- Even followers of Jesus are killed for their faith.
- It can feel like God's world is falling apart. It's blindingly obvious that things are not working out as God intended.

If God's words at creation were meant to define how the world should run, something is wrong. Something is interfering with God's plans. God's edicts are not being followed. It's as if the words God spoke are bound up, not producing the fruit he intended. How could God's words at creation prove to be ineffective now?

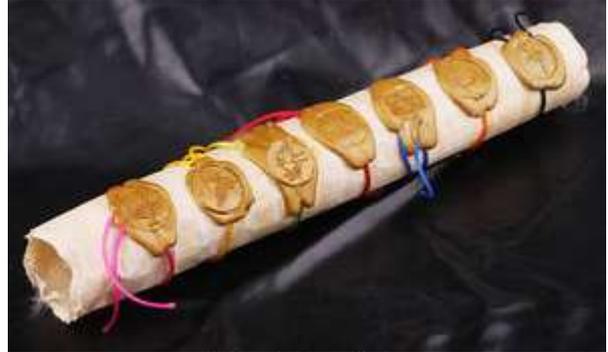
Heaven has a problem (Revelation 5)

In John's vision, the one who sits on the throne (God) has a scroll. Since God is our ruler, his words are the edicts for his realm. But there's a problem. There are seals on the scroll—things that prevent God's edicts from being carried out:

5¹ Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.

God sends a mighty angel with a proclamation to find someone who can deal with the problem—remove the seals, and unroll the script so God's edicts will once again be carried out:

5² And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" **3** But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it.



The vision devastates John: he never imagined that God has a problem that cannot be solved! He breaks down and cries:

5⁴ I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.

Can you feel what John felt? How can God be stuck?

One of the elders speaks to the distraught John, giving him a message that echoes the promises of the Old Testament prophets:

5⁵ Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

Jacob spoke a prophetic blessing over his twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel. He described Judah as a lion, a lion that would hold the sceptre, the ruler's staff, over not only Israel but the nations:

Genesis 49⁹ You are a lion's cub, Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse him? **10** The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

Jacob's prophecy was fulfilled when David became king, for David descended from the tribe of Judah. But the Davidic kingship failed when Babylon invaded and Israel became part of the Babylonian Empire. No son of David had reigned for 600 years. Yet, the prophets had promised his reign would be restored. David's family tree looked

like a stump with all the branches cut off, but Isaiah announced that a branch would sprout in David's seemingly dead tree:

Isaiah 11 ¹ A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

Jesse was David's father—the root of the Davidic tree. Isaiah promised a king, a descendant of King David who will still come to take the throne and restore the kingdom of God on earth.

When John hears the elder's words, he knows who this is! He's the long-promised ruling lion from the tribe of Judah. He's the descendant of David who would restore the divine kingship. This Lion has the power to break the seals, to unroll the scroll, to release the Creator's original edicts so that God's word is done on earth as it is in heaven! So, John turns to see this magnificent conquering lion.

What he sees is not a lion, but a lamb! It's not a conquering lion that has defeated and devoured all his enemies: it's a lamb that looks like he has been killed by his enemies! The promises of the Old Testament prophets about the coming Son of David did not prepare them for the one who came, the one who looked more like a lamb than a lion.

But he is “the Lamb of God”—the Lamb who takes away the evil rebelliousness of the world that resisted God's authority (compare John 1:29, 36). Jesus did not collect an army to face the rulers of this world and kill them. He faced them not as a lion, but as a lamb. They tried to kill him because that's what evil rulers do: they use death against their enemies to enforce their power. They failed!

John has already introduced us to this Lamb. He is:

Revelation 1 ⁵ ... the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Revelation 1 ¹⁸ ... the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

Revelation 2 ⁸ ... the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.

So where is he now? He's not dead. He's standing up! Remember the throne John saw in Revelation 4?

5 ⁶ Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders ...

The lamb is on the throne! The elders who removed their crowns and threw them down are recognizing the authority to the lamb!



When God released Israel from Pharaoh at the Red Sea, they sang a song to celebrate their liberation and the birth of their nation as the people of God. It's the first song in the Bible (Exodus 15). Later they wrote "a new song" when God gave them a great victory (e.g. Psalms 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1). The twenty-four elders (representing the OT people of God and the NT people of God), sing a new song to celebrate the lamb's great victory. It looked as if the nations had slain him, but it turned out to be the moment in history when the reign of evil was broken and earth was restored to God's reign. They celebrate the new thing the lamb has done that changes history:

5⁹ And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
10 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

The four living creatures (royal bodyguards) worship (5:8). Countless heavenly servants (angels) join in (5:11-12). Ultimately, every living thing from all three dimensions of reality join in to worship God and the lamb, for every power that opposed their authority is subdued:

5¹³ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

He reigns. Jesus has the throne. The reign of evil is over. The evils that sealed up God's words will be broken, so God's edicts can be fulfilled. Finally, the earth will operate the way he declared in the beginning.

The Lamb breaks all evils (Revelation 6)

In John's vision, the Lamb proceeds to break the seals. Each time he does, it reveals the kind of evil that has been blocking God's plans.

So, what are these evils? As the Lamb breaks the first four seals, terrifying horses charge into view. The riders are named:

- 1) Conquest (6:2)
- 2) War (6:3)
- 3) Famine (6:5-6)
- 4) Death (6:7-8)

These are the familiar evils we see on the news every night. They are human-caused evils. What God intended is that humanity would rule

over the animals (Genesis 1:26-28) while God ruled over us. But humans grasped at God's power. Instantly, it turned to murder, as Cain grasped power over his brother's life. Within seven generations, it led to great violence (Genesis 4:23-24), violence that triggered the flood (Genesis 6:11). Instead of letting God rule, people wanted to conquer each other, creating human kingdoms in place of God's kingdom (Genesis 10:8-12).

History is the story of **conquest**. Alexander the Great was bent on conquest as he marched his army through civilization after civilization killing any who would not submit to him. That's not great: the great conquerors were great murderers. Humans bent on conquest are grasping power that ought to be in God's hands. They're preventing the heavenly ruler's edicts for his world from playing out.

In the same way, the evil of **war** continues to devastate humanity and destroy people. Once again, it's the evil of people seeking to take power over each other.

Famines are not caused by droughts; they're caused by humans.

There are always dry seasons, times when people need to send aid to each other. But those who want control over people regularly block the aid, causing people to starve. There's enough food in the world that no one should be starving. But evil people profit from famine. They can set exorbitant prices when people are starving. It's evil!

Death is the weapon of the tyrant. Whether it's Pol Pot or Hitler or Stalin or King Herod or any tyrant you want to name, evil rulers slaughter their enemies to gain and keep their power. That's why the temple rulers and the Romans killed Jesus—to keep their power. Killing the one God had sent as our ruler wasn't surprising: it was completely predictable, because that's what evil rulers do. They bind up God's plans (where God rules) and unfurl their own instead.

When you think about sin, is this what you think about? Should we think about sin not merely as individual misdemeanours, but as human resistance against God's rule, the things that bind up God's intentions for the world, the kind of thing that caused humanity to kill Jesus?

Since death is the ultimate weapon of the tyrant, it is the ultimate enemy of God's rule (1 Corinthians 15:26). We've already heard how Jesus conquered death with his resurrection (Revelation 1:18), so the slaughtered Lamb is now standing on the throne (5:6). But we don't have our resurrection bodies yet. Consequently, the powers that resist God's rule treat us the way they treated Jesus. We may be imprisoned, or even put to death. Just as Jesus remained faithful to the heavenly ruler—even though evil people put him to death—that could be our experience too. He calls us to “be faithful unto death” (2:10).

5) Martyrdom (6:9-11)

That's the evil that's disclosed when the Lamb breaks the fifth seal: killing followers of Jesus, just as they killed him. The **martyrs** wonder how long God will let this go on. There will come a time when this evil will cease, but John is told it's not yet (6:9-11).

6) Disintegration of the powers (6:12-14)

When the sixth seal is broken, it exposes the grip of evil is so deeply entrenched that it feels like God's good creation will disintegrate.

Originally, the heavenly lights were *signs* of God's ordered rule, day and night (Genesis 1:14-18). When the prophets spoke of the heavenly powers falling out of place, it was figurative language, e.g.:

Isaiah 34:4 (NIV) All the stars in the sky will be dissolved and the heavens rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shrivelled figs from the fig tree.

When we describe something as "earth-shattering," it's a figure of speech: we don't literally mean the earth is breaking into shards. Apocalyptic literature used the imagery of the powers falling from the sky in the same way. It was another way to say that those who currently held power in the world were about to lose their grip, that the whole world was turned upside down. This reversal of power makes a big difference for "the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty" as well as everyone else (6:15).

They will lose their power, for as these evils are broken, power returns where it should have been in the first place: back into the hands of God. No one—no ruler, no power—can stand against the Lamb (6:17).

7) The final seal (8:1)

The grip of the last evil seal is not broken until the following chapter. It's a technique John uses several times to keep us in suspense. He regularly ties the last element of one set to the start of the next one, in the same way that a good author sometimes finishes a chapter by introducing the drama of the chapter ahead.

But it's more than just a technique. Many times in history, people rejoiced when an evil regime has been brought down. But they had not considered what would fill the power vacuum. We've seen this in Iraq. People danced when Saddam Hussein was ousted. But what has taken his place? Since what has happened since 2003? Has there been peace and prosperity? Or have the same evils persisted—suicide bombers, conquest, war, death, suicide bombers, and even martyrdom of Christians?



The failure of a bad regime is not enough. Only the installation of a good ruler truly saves the world, and the only truly good ruler is the Lamb!

That's why Chapter 7 describes the reign of the Lamb before the final seal is broken in Chapter 8. For when the Lamb is reigning, and the final evil is broken, no horseman comes rushing out. No evil is exposed. There's just silence (8:1). Unopposed, peace reigns at last.

The Lamb restores God's reign (Revelation 7)

Before the Lamb sends in the winds of change to overturn every form of resistance to his reign, he makes sure that the people who bow to his authority are protected. They must be clearly marked as under his protection (7:3). God puts his name on his people (Numbers 6:27).

When Babylon invaded Jerusalem in 587 BC, the prophets described it as God's judgement because of disobedience. But Ezekiel said that God put a protective mark on those whose hearts were faithful to him (Ezekiel 9:4-6). In John's vision also, the heavenly ruler knows and protects those who are his (7:1-3).

So, who are the 144,000?

7⁴ Then I heard the number of those who were sealed:
144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

Firstly, this is not something John saw, but something he *heard*. God's promises in the Old Testament always related to the twelve tribes of Israel, for they were God's people. The trouble was that the twelve tribes disintegrated. Most of them lost their national identity when Assyria invaded, exiled them, and imported people from elsewhere. The "Samaritans" were racially mixed. Then what was left (Judah) was exiled to Babylon. They returned, but at least one tribe was not represented at all when they returned (as listed in Chronicles).

Even though the twelve tribes had diminished or even disintegrated, in John's vision they were represented as a large complete number (12,000) from each of the twelve tribes—all present and accounted for. God has his people. All of them. Every one of them.

But if you're observant, you'll notice that the list of the twelve tribes does not match the list of the twelve tribes in the Old Testament. Dan is missing. So is Ephraim. So how can there still be twelve?

Jacob had 12 sons. But the priestly tribe, Levi, didn't receive land. To make up for that, they made two tribes out of Joseph, by counting his two sons as tribes in their own right. Ephraim and Manasseh are tribes who received land, instead of Joseph and Levi.

But the twelve tribes listed in Revelation 7:5-8 are different again. Levi is included. Joseph is included, even though Manasseh is one of Joseph's descendants. This isn't a literal list of tribes. The numbers must be symbolic.

We're not told why Dan and Ephraim are missing, just that they are not counted among the followers of the Lamb. It may be significant that when Israel split (930 BC), they set up golden calves: one at Dan in the north, and the other at Bethel (in Ephraim) in the south.

Having *heard* that God has his complete people, symbolically all present and accounted for, John now turns to *see* this crowd. But what he sees doesn't match what he heard. The crowd he sees is not 144,000: it's a vastly larger multitude. And they are not all Israelites: they're "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (7:9).

We've seen this literary device before. In 5:5, John *heard* about the Lion of Judah, but what he *saw* was the Lamb. What they had seen in Jesus didn't match what they expected from the OT prophets. The same is true of his people. What you might expect from the OT prophets is the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel, but what God has done through the Messiah is so much larger. The people of God—the people known by God and marked as his people—are now not just a limited number of Israelites, but people from all over the world who belong to the Messiah!

John sees these non-Jewish people standing before the throne, before the Lamb. They've been cleansed—clothed in white robes like the priests. They're holding palm branches in their hands as they honour the Lamb as their sovereign. They are joyfully singing the song of being rescued from the clutches of evil back into God's domain, by the Lamb:

7⁹ ... 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 before 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."

The Lamb has done so much more than anyone expected. They expected God to restore the tribes of Israel under his kingship, but he has actually brought the nations into his kingship! Hallelujah!

Now this was controversial in John's time. This crowd of gentiles—people from every tribe and nation and language—are so cleansed by the Lamb that they serve as priests in God's temple:

7¹⁴ ... 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 shelter them with his presence."

These gentiles have also experienced the distress of evil rule in the world, and yet they have submitted to the Lamb, the Jewish Messiah. They honour the Lamb as their Lord. He cleansed them, drew them into his holy presence, and cares for them.

The seven churches, the original recipients of John's vision, were made up of a mix of Jews and gentiles. Like the exiled John, they are enduring the present tribulation (1:9; 2:9-10, 22). What an encouragement that John sees them in the temple, honouring the Lamb who rules for ever and ever.

Conclusion

In this session, we covered only a small amount of text, to show that the Book of Revelation (like every other part of the Bible) is about Jesus and the good news (gospel) that he reigns.

Memory verse

Revelation 5:9–10 (NIV)

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,
because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth."

In preparation for next week, please read Revelation 11 – 14.

Take home exercise

Views of the millennium, return of Christ, and tribulation

Some people try to draw up charts of the future. We won't be covering those in this class, so this is for you if you're wondering about the charts. If you're not interested in them, you can ignore this.

Revelation 20:1-7 talks about a 1000-year period (a millennium) when Christ reigns. There are several views about what it means:

- **Premillennialism:** We are living before the 1000-year reign, which will start when Christ returns.
- **Postmillennialism:** We are to convert the world, so that Christ can come back to reign.
- **Amillennialism:** 1000 years is a symbolic number, not a literal period in the future.

Premillennialism is divided into two groups. In the 1830s, J. Nelson Darby had difficulty reconciling Scriptures about Jesus' return. He thought some passages said Jesus' return would be visible, while others depicted it as a secret. He concluded that Jesus' return must be two different events: a secret coming to snatch his people out of the world (the *rapture*), and then a visible return seven years later. Darby had divided history up into seven periods, called dispensations. Darby's view became known as **dispensational premillennialism**: it's different to historic premillennialism because it splits up the return of Christ into two events (rapture and return).

Even though it's only a recent view, dispensational premillennialism became popular in USA, due to people like: C. I. Scofield (*Scofield Reference Bible*), Lewis Sperry Chafer (founder of Dallas Theological Seminary), Hal Lindsay (author of *The Late Great Planet Earth*), and Tim LaHaye. The *Left Behind* movie series presents this view.

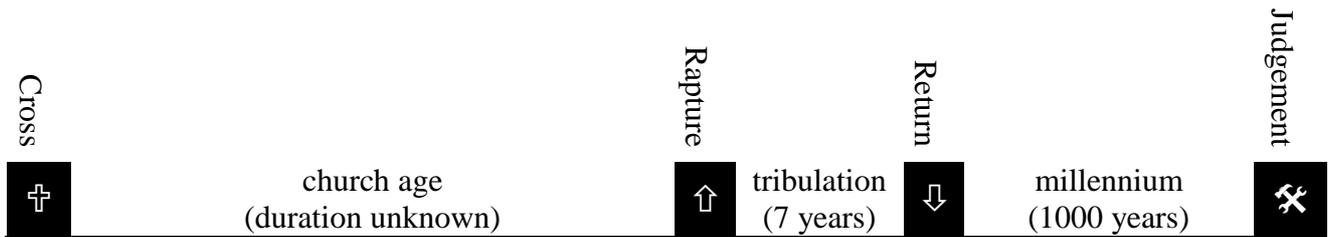
So, if you split Jesus' second coming into a rapture and return, what happens in between? The dispensational premillennialists decided this must be the tribulation, though some thought the tribulation would be only the last 3½ years of that period. That means there are two kinds of dispensational premillennialism:

- pre-tribulation premillennialism: the tribulation is a period of suffering immediately after the rapture;
- mid-tribulation premillennialism: the tribulation is 3½ years after the rapture;

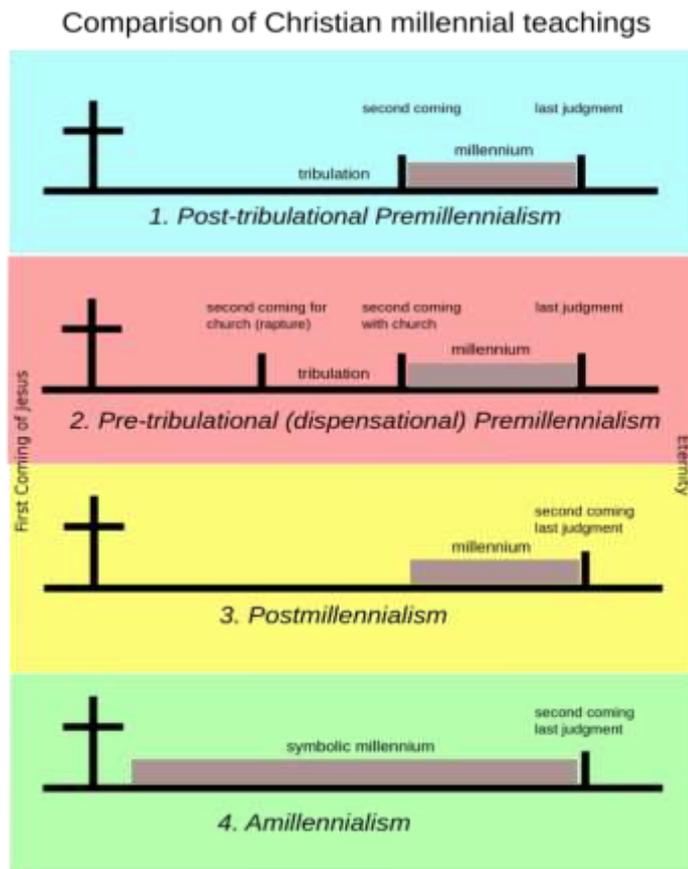
Since premillennialism is split into two types, and one of them is split into two more types, so we now have these views:

- 1) Premillennialism:
 - a) Dispensational Premillennialism:
 - Pre-tribulation
 - Mid-tribulation
 - b) Historic Premillennialism (post-trib. premil.)
- 2) Postmillennialism
- 3) Amillennialism

The dispensational premillennialists made charts to explain their points of view. For example, pretribulation dispensational premillennialists chart their view like this:



The four major views of the millennium could be charted something like this:



Historic premillennialism: the millennium is still in the future when Jesus returns, but without dividing Christ’s return into two events (i.e.no secret rapture).

Dispensational premillennialism: Darby’s recent view of a separate rapture and return in the future, with a tribulation somewhere in between and a millennium to follow.

Postmillennialism: Christ’s reign will come when the world is converted and invites Jesus back.

Amillennialism: The 1000 years is a symbolic number, not a literal period in the future.

We already noted that the view of the tribulation as a 7 or 3½ period after the rapture doesn’t work well in Revelation. The idea that countless people from all over the globe will be saved after the secret rapture is largely self-defeating. There is no passage in the Bible that talks about the rapture and a second coming: it depends on fitting verses from different passages together to create this view. And, of course, “rapture” is not a term found anywhere in the Bible. Consequently, dispensational premillennialism is not popular among Biblical scholars.

We’ll talk more about the millennium when we come to Revelation 20. Whatever it means, it’s only a handful of verses from a single chapter, so it ought not to be the thing that defines your understanding of the whole book. Revelation keeps telling us that God has the throne. We need to understand the brief passage on the millennium in light of that broad theme, rather than make that brief passage the theme that defines the whole book.