

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Revelation 8:1-5

Introduction:

Read Rev. 1:1-3. Almost 6 months ago we began working our way through the book of Revelation. It is now 7 weeks since we left off the series before Christmas, so I think a bit of review is in order.

The first three verses, which I just read, are a prologue to the content of the book and are critical to an understanding of this revelation. There are two important elements to this prologue. The first element gives us the intent or purpose for the writing of this book. The second is a promise to those who are diligent to understand and respond to the content of the book.

v. 1-2 give us the purpose and how it is revealed. The whole purpose of this book is to reveal the things which must take place in the future. *Discuss this briefly...*

v. 3 lays out the promise of blessing to those who read and understand and keep, or live by, what is written in it.

The key verse of chapter 1, which is really an outline of the book, is found in v. 19, After Jesus Christ has revealed himself in all of his glory to John, he gives him instruction regarding the writing of this book – *read v. 19.*

- The things that you have seen – the revelation of the Son of Man which he has been given prior to this command.
- Those that are – the current state of events. Chapters 2-3 give a picture of the current church age, both positive and negative.
- Those that are to take place after this – future events. John is to record the things that are to happen after the current age is completed. Chapters 4-22 record the events of the end times.

I would like to take a couple of minutes to review chapters 2-3 where Jesus reveals a very mixed picture of the church.

The Church – A Mixed Review

In these chapters, Jesus reveals to John a series of letters addressed to seven specific churches that existed in his day. But as you read them from our perspective, about 19 centuries later, it seems that the description of these churches easily describe the church of any age.

Among these churches, there are those who are faithful and those who face the Lord's judgment because of apostasy or apathy. The churches:

- Ephesus – a church that is strong and diligent in doctrine and service, yet they have lost their love and passion for the Lord.
- Smyrna – a church faithful in the face of intense persecution and suffering. They are commended and promised a great reward for their faithfulness
- Pergamum – a church standing firm against Satanic attacks, yet embracing false doctrine and the doctrines of demons. Jesus has some strong words of condemnation for this church.
- Thyatira – another church that appears to be strong and even growing in faithfulness. Yet they are tolerating, in their midst, those who are teaching error and leading people into false doctrine and immorality.
- Sardis – a church which looked good on the outside, but had no spiritual life. They were living on their reputation, but God looked within and saw deadness. Yet even here there was a small remnant of faithful believers.
- Philadelphia – was a church facing great trial and persecution, yet standing at the door of great opportunities. God was pleased with the faithfulness of this small struggling church.
- Laodicea – a church where the key word was compromise. They were lukewarm in their devotion to God, believing that they had everything, yet unaware that, in God's view, they were poor, wretched and pitiable.

Throughout the centuries of the church age, this is fairly indicative of what the church is like. In every age, just as in John's time and today, there have been those who were faithful in the face of suffering, those

who were compromising, those who were self-satisfied, those who have abandoned the truth and embraced error, and those who have faithfully served Christ, regardless of circumstances.

Well, the first part of John's vision was a revelation of Christ himself, shown in all of his glory, the One who is the First and the Last, the Alpha and the Omega. He is the One who was and who is and who is to come, worthy of all worship, and the one who holds all power in his hands.

The second part of John's vision was the things that are—a picture of the church. At times faithful and strong, at other times weak and sinful, but there is always a remnant of faithful servants who love God with their whole heart and are faithful in serving Him.

Then we come to the third part of John's vision – the things that must take place after this.

A Glimpse into Heaven

In chapters 4 and 5 we are given two views of scenes in heaven where the saints and the angels are gathered around the throne of God, falling down in worship. The first scene focuses on three aspects of God's nature – his holiness, his eternal character, and his worthiness – see vv. 8, 11.

In the second scene—ch. 5—we see the entire heavenly realm desperately searching for one who is worthy to break the seals on the scroll which contains the future destiny of the world. No one can be found who can open the scroll and set in motion the events of the end-times, until one of the elders announces that one has been found—the Lion of the tribe of Judah. But when John looks he sees not a lion but a Lamb. It is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the one who was slain for the sin of the world, but is alive again.

When he steps forward and takes the scroll from the Father, the heavens break out with a great roar of worship and praise for the one who is indeed worthy. *We read, - read 5:9-14.*

With that song of praise echoing through the heavens, the Lamb begins to break the seals and open the scroll, and John sees, in rapid succession the events begin to unfold.

The Beginning of the End

In the sixth chapter of Revelation, in the span of 17 verses, John outlines a series of events which encompass the entire first half of the 7-year tribulation period.

The first seal, with the entrance of a white horse, reveals a period of conquest as the Antichrist rises to power over the entire world.

The second seal, with its red horse, reveals a period of war and bloodshed as peace is shattered and taken from the earth.

The third seal, with a black horse, introduces a time of famine and starvation as there is a lack of food.

The fourth seal, accompanied by the pale horse of death, is the culmination of the previous two, as a quarter of the earth's population is killed "...with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth." (6:8b)

Seal number five opens up a vision of a great multitude of souls—those who have been slain for their testimony and allegiance to the Word of God. They are crying out, wondering how long this has to go on before the Lord will bring an end to the judgment. They are assured that when their number is filled up, the end will come.

When the sixth seal was opened, it really looked like the end was come. Earthquakes, the sun and moon darkened, stars falling from the sky. The entire earth was in convulsions, and people—from the least to the greatest—crying out to God, longing for death. But this is only the beginning of the end.

Chapter 7 is a kind of interlude, dealing with two separate subjects. The first is the numbering of 144,000 Jewish witnesses, who are sealed for protection from the judgments to come. We see them later as witnesses to the world.

The second part of the chapter is another picture of the Tribulation saints who have been martyred for their faith in God and refusing to worship the Antichrist. They are washed and cleansed, and serving God day and night before His throne in heaven.

The Seventh Seal and the Coming Storm

Well, we have come to chapter 8. We are really only going to introduce this chapter this morning. I would like to read verses 1-5 again.

When the seventh seal was opened, it ushered in, or set in motion, a whole new set of catastrophic events and judgments. These events are announced by seven angels with seven trumpets. And the intensity and fierceness of these events make what happened previously seem very tame by comparison.

List of the key elements in these verses:

- v. 1 – seventh seal, silence in heaven
- v. 2 – seven angels with seven trumpets
- v. 3 – angel with a golden censor filled with incense – the prayers of the saints
- v. 4 - the smoke of the incense with the prayers of the saints rising up to God
- v. the fire of God's judgment thrown out over the earth – thunder, lightning and an earthquake

There are a couple of things I would like to focus on for just a bit. In verse 1, as the seventh seal is opened, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

I do not have any definitive answer as to the significance of a half-hour silence in heaven. But when you look at the whole context and you see what happens following the opening of this seventh seal, I cannot help but think that it is a silence of dread and anticipation.

It is like the calm before the storm. Illustration – as a child, the anticipation of a great thunder storm—that period of calm, quiet. There is a sense of dread in the air. The animals are agitated, the wind stops, everything gets quiet and still. Yet you know that shortly the wind is going to pick up, the lightning is going to begin to flash, the rain will come, perhaps even hail and destruction.

When I read these verses and what follows, as I see what is to come on the earth, I imagine all the heavenly host becoming still, quiet, overwhelmed by the terror of what is to come.

The first half of the Tribulation period, covered by the first six seals, is only a build-up for the coming wrath of God that is to be unleashed with the opening of the seventh seal. As the angels and even the saints who are in heaven begin to grasp the horror of what is to happen, they fall silent, unable to even speak.

Conclusion

As we wrap this up, we need to again ask the question, what does this mean for us? As believers, we will be in heaven when these events occur, and will escape the terrible wrath of God which is about to be unleashed on the earth. But for those who are left, who refuse to bow the knee to the Lord Jesus, there are terrible things coming.

As I think about this passage there are a couple points I would like to make. First there is the reality of God's judgment. We have already seen some of that in the first part of this book. But the opening of the seventh seal is the beginning of a period of judgment and wrath like the world has never seen. There are many who see God only as a God of love, who would never punish or judge anyone. But that is not the God of the Bible. We must never minimize the wrath of God toward sin and wickedness.

The other thing that stand out to me here is in vv. 3-4. In the midst of the harshness of God's anger and wrath, our focus is taken to the place that prayer occupies in the economy of God. Even in the face of divine wrath and judgment, the prayers of God's people rise up like incense before God.

As we look ahead at the coming year, we may see uncertainties; we may see trouble and difficulties. But rest assured, that no matter the circumstance, God hears the prayers of his people and is ready to respond to them.

One other closing thought is the fact that clearly God is in control of the events recorded in the book of Revelation, and He is in control of the events of our lives and our world today.

Let us continue through the coming year with that confidence...