

Subject Line: Revelation Week Two

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Happy Sunday,

In just about 100 days, the Summer Olympics will kick off in Paris. These athletic games have a long tradition, dating back to ancient Greece and Rome. The original readers of Revelation would have been intimately familiar with the games. In fact, John is going to expertly weave the culture around the ancient Olympic games into the first nine chapters of Revelation.

These days, Olympic athletes compete on behalf of a country. But when they succeed, the glory really belongs to them; we talk about how talented and skilled the *athlete* is themselves. In the ancient world, athletes competed in the name of the patron god of their city (think Zeus, Jupiter, Artemis, etc.). When the athlete did well, the *god* was the one who received honor and glory.

As for the games themselves, the opening ceremonies were orchestrated to bring honor to the emperor. They were structured in this way: There would be a presentation of the emperor and an announcement of his mighty deeds. Then the emperor would make a pronouncement to the cities offering praise (*I have heard these positive things about you*) and admonishment (*I have this against you...*), finishing with a challenge (*fix it or else here's what is going to happen to you*). Then, the 24 priests of the 24 official Roman religions would sing the imperial Anthem to the emperor, lifting him up as both “god of gods” and “king of kings.” At last, the games would kick off with chariot races led by four horses (white, red, black, and pale/spotted) and the trumpets sounding.

Does any of this sound familiar? Likely, your mind is already firing through the first few of these elements based on last week's reading, and this week finishes the list. This can be no coincidence. John designed the first nine chapters to be a sort of opening ceremony from God's perspective. Only God is the one being presented and His deeds are the ones being lifted up. Jesus will give his pronouncement to the seven churches, and hymns will be sung to both Jesus and God before the four horsemen are loosed and the trumpets sound. P.S. If you're a fan of charts, [take a look at this week's Visual Guide which breaks this analogy down by chapters](#).

What does all of this mean? What message is John trying to convey to his early readers and by extension us today? **Just like these ancient athletes, we also are running a race of Olympic proportions.** And while there may be moments for those in the midst of persecution where it seems like the enemy is winning, ultimately, God will be victorious.

To a group of people feeling the pressure in ancient Rome, John says remember on whose behalf you are competing. The stakes couldn't be higher. **The way we run our race every day will either bring honor or dishonor to God. So run your race!**

What race are you running?

All of us face pressure every day to run different races, to chase after different things we think will bring us victory or honor or glory of our own. The message of Revelation echoing through the generations to us today is to keep our eyes on the ultimate prize. We represent God in all we do; the way we live reveals God to the world. No other race is worth running. *So go run your race!*

And with that, happy reading, friends!

About the Reading

Monday | Revelation 5:1-14

Remember, today is technically part two of what we read last Friday. Where chapter four was all about God, chapter five is all about Jesus.

Scrolls were a visceral symbol in the ancient world of power and greatness. Whenever a proclamation needed to be made, the deliverer would hold up a large scroll. The more writing on the scroll, the greater the one in charge must be. And if there was writing on both sides, that was the epitome of greatness.

In Jewish synagogues, there would be a special chair called the Moses Seat. It was where the authority to teach rested; whoever taught had the authority of Moses. Above this seat was an inscription that read, "Only he who is worthy, take, open, read" (think back to Rev. 4:11). Now, each scroll that would be read in the synagogue would have a seal that must first be broken for it to be read. The effect for teachers in the synagogue is clear: *make sure you're worthy before you break that seal.*

In Rev. 5 we encounter a scroll with seven seals (this is the *ultimate* scroll) and writing on the front and back. And a mighty angel proclaims out loud before all, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break the seals?" From context, we deduce that the contents of this scroll include God's plan to bring renewal and salvation to the whole world. In other words, it is deeply important, especially for those who are currently suffering, that this scroll be opened and enacted. But there's a big problem.

"No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it."

This is tragic. How can God's rescue mission be enacted if there is none worthy? It's no wonder John is upset at this pronouncement!

But there is good news. First, we learn what John *hears*, and then what he *sees* (remember, pay attention to these moments!). One of the 24 elders calls out to John (this is what he *hears*), saying, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

This verse is ripe with Old Testament themes and imagery. Judah is one of the 12 tribes of

Israel, the tribe Jesus descends from. In [Gen. 49](#), Judah's father, Jacob, makes him a promise.

“Judah, your brothers shall praise you;
your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;
your father's sons shall bow down before you.

Judah is a lion's cub;

from the prey, my son, you have gone up.

He stooped down; **he crouched as a lion**
and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?

The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until tribute comes to him”

This is where we get the idea of the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. The lion will be victorious, defeating his enemies, he will be praised by all others, and will rule forever.

The root of David is not only a reference to the Davidic Covenant, which is closely tied to the idea of Messiah, it specifically links back to The Root of Jesse in [Isaiah 11](#). Take a moment to read the whole passage, but here's one highlight:

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.”

Israel as a tree has been cut down due to their unfaithfulness and rebellion, but God promises that from the stump that remains, new life will grow; a branch will spring up from Jesse (David's lineage). This will be the faithful one who doesn't judge by what his eyes see (v. 3) but will judge with righteousness.

Together these images evoke victory, a conquer like David who will come to restore God's kingdom and usher in the Messianic age for God's people. This is all what John *hears*.

Now for what he sees. “I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.”

Instead of a warrior king, a ferocious lion, John *sees* a slaughtered lamb (likely covered in blood). The lamb has seven horns (symbol for power) and seven eyes (symbol for wisdom); aka, this lamb is the *most* powerful and has the *utmost* wisdom. This is the suffering servant of [Isaiah 53](#) and the Passover lamb of [Exodus 12](#). There was a tradition in Jewish Passover preparations where the 24 elders would be the ones to identify the spotless lamb to be slaughtered. Here we see that happening in Revelation.

Who is the one worthy to open the scroll? The Messiah, the one who is both lion and lamb, who conquered not through military might, but through his death. This is the one to whom the 24 elders and the creatures bow down before. They offer up their harps (worship) and incense (prayers) before him.

They sing a *new song* to Jesus. For Jewish readers, the idea of a *new song* would've

immediately brought them back to the Exodus story. After God's people were brought out of slavery in Egypt, after God split the sea and then destroyed Pharaoh's army, the people sang a victory song to God ([Exodus 15](#)). Through the generations, God's people began to yearn for a *new* victory song; they looked forward to a day when God would once again deliver His people. Now, John claims, that moment has arrived as the Lamb prepares to open the scroll to which only he is worthy to open.

“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”

This *new song* is also laden with links to the Hebrew Bible, calling back to mind images from Exodus and Isaiah that we've already briefly mentioned. By the blood of Jesus, he *ransomed* (or covered the debt of) people for God. And not just Jewish people, but people from all languages and nations. They *all* are made into a “kingdom and priests to our God.” This is a direct callback to [Exodus 19:5-6](#), where God tells the people gathered around Mt. Sinai that, if they obey his commandments, they will be “my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a **kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**”

This is great news! It means the original mission of God's people to be a light to the Gentiles, to bring blessing to all nations, is taking place. A new deliverance is occurring! And it means that the people of God have *purpose*. NT Wright explains, “We find that the lamb is being praised, not just for rescuing us but for turning us from hopeless rebels into useful servants, from sin-slaves into ‘a kingdom and priests’. From rubbish into royalty.”

But the song doesn't stop there. They continue singing, now with thousands upon thousands of angels joining in.

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

And then, at last, the crescendo builds as the final verse arises, this time joined by all creatures in the cosmos. **Three times the Lamb is to be declared worthy of praise and glory.** He is not just worthy, he is the *most* worthy.

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

Amen, Amen. Do you catch what's happening? They sing to both God and Jesus, ascribing them both blessing and honor and glory forever. The creatures, elders, angels, and all creatures in the cosmos are *worshipping the Father and Son together*.

As Walt Marcum says, Revelation is now leaving the realm of Judaism. Revelation is making the startling claim that Jesus and God are equally deserving of our worship, praise, and adoration; they are one.

Jesus is the worthy one, the *only* one, who can usher in a new deliverance for God's people,

opening the scroll and setting into motion the ultimate plan of God for renewal and restoration of the world.

– AJ

Tuesday | Revelation 6:1-17

I want to be honest and tell you that Alex, Hannah, and I spent a substantial amount of time wrestling with this chapter last week. I say this to reassure any of you who feel like there are passages you just can't make heads or tails of that this is a complex book! Beautiful and worthwhile, but complex nonetheless. I hope that the wrestling we did helps unlock the meaning of this chapter for you. Consider us your partners as you ponder its intricacies!

Hannah really brought clarity to this chapter for me by reminding me that Revelation is like a stage production. In fact, scholars think that Revelation would have been performed in dramatic readings or even plays! So today my challenge to you is to fire up your imagination and try to picture this as a stage production, a drama that is supposed to evoke *feelings*. Today's passage builds our anticipation and brings us to the edge of our seats.

We begin riding the high of the glorious praise in the throne room for the Father and the slain lamb, and the audience assumes that *surely* this magnificent praise session will propel us into God's healing for the whole world...

But what we immediately realize is that, before God brings his healing, he has some business to do with the dark powers and forces of evil in this world.

You'll remember from yesterday that Jesus, the slain lamb, is holding the scroll from God in his hands, and this scroll has seven wax seals on it. As the lamb begins to open the seals, one by one, we are confronted with the suffering, evil, and destruction that has occurred throughout the ages.

The first four seals release four horsemen who represent conquest, war, economic injustice, and death. Tim Mackie calls the four horsemen a window into a **“tragically average day in human history.”** Imagine a newsreel of the tragedies occurring in our world right now. Wouldn't it include war, conquest, economic injustice, and death? Unfortunately, I think every era of history from first-century Rome until now has been infected by them.



The first horseman represents conquering kings and empires who wreak havoc by overcoming nations and claiming sovereignty over them. The popular phrase, “I came, I saw, I conquered” originated as the slogan of Julius Caesar, and for the first-century church, the link between their present context in Rome and this conquering horseman would have been obvious.

But did you know that Rome had one formidable enemy that they never managed to defeat? The only nation Rome was scared of was the Parthian Empire, and they were famous for their mounted archers. If you have ever heard of the “[Parting \(or Parthian\) shot](#),” this term was coined because Parthian soldiers would perform a feigned retreat and turn back to shoot at their pursuing enemy. So, when the first-century church heard about this first horseman who rides in with a crown on his head and a bow in his, ready to conquer, they would have connected the image to Rome and its enemy empires.

The second horseman rides out and “takes peace from the earth so that people should slay one another.” The rider sits atop a red horse, which symbolizes bloodshed. It isn’t too difficult to see that this horseman represents the war and violence that have torn people apart throughout history, and Rome, of course, had blood on its hands.

When the third seal is opened, out comes a black horse and a rider with a pair of scales in his hand to represent economic injustice. They were no strangers to this in first-century Rome, which was in a crippling grain shortage at the time. “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius” (v.6) are the exact prices of grain found in ancient Roman records, and they are 500 times the average price before the shortage (yes, you read that right). Since a denarius was a common laborer’s daily wage, this means that they would be spending their entire day’s wage on a quart of wheat! Can you imagine how hard this made it for the working class to afford ordinary commodities?

Then, the fourth seal is opened, and Death (personified) rides out, with his friend Hades (the underworld, abode of the dead) following him.

Conquest, war, economic injustice, and death.

N.T. Wright calls these the four basic ills that humans inflict on one another, and as seal after seal is opened, **we are meant to feel the weight of the brokenness in our world pressing in on us.**

And to increase this mounting tension, John creates a sort of interlude for the fifth seal. Imagine that this newsreel of earthly tragedies suddenly cuts back to the scene in heaven, and we see a crowd of Christian martyrs crying out for God to bring justice to the world! Remember that persecution was a real and very present part of life for the first-century Christians, so this wouldn't be a faceless crowd. For them, it would be filled with their aunt, cousin, next-door neighbor, best friend, etc. who refused to bend the knee and who gave their lives standing up for the Gospel.

Sadly, they are told to wait a little longer for God's justice to arrive.

We, too, wait a little longer. The cry of "How long, O Lord?" echoes through the centuries. Sometimes we are the victims of these evils, and sometimes we find ourselves, as Marty Solomon aptly puts it, at the hilt end of the Roman sword. Either way, we know that these tragedies happen among us, too. We see it in Israel and Gaza, in racial injustice, in unhoused populations, in the grief of a fallen soldier's widow...

How do the first five seals make you feel, as an audience member?

I think we are meant to feel a growing *urgency*, a *desperation* for God to set things right.

N.T. Wright describes the seals this way: "The soul of the world is aware of immediate problems and pains; but **unless we look deeper, to the ancient patterns of conquest, violence, oppression and death itself we shall not begin to understand what needs to be done if the world is to be healed, really healed** rather than merely patched together for a few more years...What happens when the 'seals' are opened is that the forces of human conquest and oppression are allowed to do their worst, before the divine purpose, which is to deal with the world's ills, can be read from the scroll."

The good news is that the sixth seal gives us hope that God starting to move. John paints a vivid picture of the natural world falling apart: there is an earthquake, the stars fall, the mountains tumble, and the people run and hide. Remember that this is apocalyptic imagery, so instead of a literal description, John is painting a metaphorical picture of what we might call "earth-shattering events." This language points us back to one of the predominant themes of the Hebrew prophets: [the Day of the LORD](#). The Day of the LORD was a term used to describe God's intervention in history to bring justice and purification, which would lead to healing on the other side.

In [Joel 2](#), we see a very similar prophecy:

*Let all who live in the land tremble,
for the day of the Lord is coming.
It is close at hand—
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and blackness.
Like dawn spreading across the mountains*

*a large and mighty army comes,
such as never was in ancient times
nor ever will be in ages to come...
Before them the **earth shakes**,
the heavens tremble,
the **sun and moon are darkened**,
and the **stars no longer shine**...
The day of the Lord is great;
it is dreadful.
Who can endure it?*

Joel finishes with this vision of the hope that lies on the other side of the judgment:

*And afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions...
And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.*

John is showing us that the Day of the LORD is on its way, and this is why the people flee and cry out, “**the great day** of [the Father and Son’s] wrath has come, and who can stand?”

And here we end on a cliffhanger.

In your mind’s eye, imagine the stage production. As the audience waits with bated breath for the Day of the LORD to arrive with justice and healing, the stage goes to a blackout.

And that question—who can stand?—rings in the air as we wait for the seventh seal to be opened...

– EH

Wednesday | Revelation 7:1-17

As the lights come up on the next part of John’s vision, we find ourselves in another interlude, and instead of opening the seventh seal on the scroll, God first *places a different type of seal on his people*. Think about the functions of wax seals; not only could they hold a scroll or envelope closed, but they were also often used for identification, such as when a king would stamp the wax with his ring to leave the imprint of his royal seal. We’ve probably all seen this in the movies! It’s as if God is sending an angel down with his signet ring to mark his people as his own.

In this way, God answers our lingering question from yesterday: “Who can stand?”

Those who can stand in the Day of the LORD are the ones who bear his mark. (Note: keep that image of “bearing the mark” in your back pocket for future passages!)

Now, it's important to note that John *hears* the number of those who were sealed—144,000—but then later in verse 9 *sees* a multitude too great to count. We've mentioned this theme before: when what John hears is different than what he sees, our expectations are about to be subverted (like when John heard a lion but saw the slain lamb).

He *hears* the number of the 144,000 in a military census, the likes of which you might be familiar with from Old Testament passages like [Numbers 2](#). Each of the twelve tribes of Israel is said to have 12,000 who are sealed, which adds up to 144,000 in all, but these are all symbolic numbers:

12 is symbolic of the people of God (because of the tribes)
1,000 is the number of absolute, complete community

So when we see that this is 12 tribes x 12,000 people, **the symbolic meaning here is that all of God's people are present. No one is missing, and no one is left out.**

Furthermore, since we are being hyperlinked back to the army of Israel, this naturally tees us up to assume that the army of the Lord is approaching! God's military has arrived!

However, when John turns his head, what he doesn't see 144,000 soldiers dressed for battle. What he sees is a multitude from every tribe, tongue, and nation (which fulfills God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12). He is looking at a huge sea of people whose robes have been made white in the blood of the lamb (v. 14). They are praising God and the lamb, and in their hands are *palm branches*.

Why palm branches? you ask. Let me explain, it's a great story:

After the Israelites had been delivered from Egypt, God instituted a system of rituals and festivals to help them remember who they were and who he is, and one of the festivals was called Sukkot, or the Feast of Booths. The Israelites were commanded to construct and live in "booths" made from the branches of palm trees ([Lev 23:40](#)) to commemorate the time they spent living in tents after God gave them victory and freedom.



(Booths from modern-day Sukkot celebrations)

Several hundred years later, the prophet [Zechariah saw another apocalyptic vision](#) of every nation streaming toward Jerusalem to celebrate the great festival of Sukkot together. Instead of coming to Jerusalem for battle, he foretold a day when every tribe and tongue would wave their

palm branches and worship God together and *the people of God would live in ultimate victory and peace.*

These **palm branches became the Israelite symbol for victory**, and in 167 BC, the Jews cheered and waved their palm branches not for God but for a warrior. His name was [Judas Maccabeus](#). Judas was the leader of the Maccabean revolution which was fought to reclaim Jerusalem from control by the Seleucid empire who had conquered it. The Seleucids had killed thousands of Jews and desecrated the temple, but Judas, affectionately known as “The Hammer” led the forces that prevailed over the Seleucids, and in the apocryphal book of Maccabees, we see Judas being celebrated with praise and palm branches as he rode into Jerusalem. They even made coins stamped with the image of palm branches to commemorate his victory.



Riding into Jerusalem to a parade of palm branches... Does that remind you of another story you know? Jesus' Triumphal Entry! When Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, the crowds once again waved palms and shouted, “Save us, son of David!”

They were welcoming a king they hoped would be their next Judas Maccabeus. They waved their palm branches remembering God's deliverance from Egypt, and cheered for Jesus with fervent hope that he was coming to squash the Romans just like he did Pharaoh. They thought they were welcoming “The Hammer,” but instead, they welcomed the Lamb who would soon be slain.

Turning back to Revelation, we see a crowd of people from all nations with palm branches in their hands, proclaiming victory like they did for Judas! **But this time, the crowd waves their palm branches with full recognition that they are following the Slain Lamb, and he is the victor.**

*“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”*

This is *exactly* what Zechariah prophesied.

John *hears* the army of Israel but sees disciples from all nations. They wave palm branches because they recognize that **victory comes not through bloodshed but by being washed in the blood of the lamb.**

Think back to the letters to the seven churches. Conquering and victory were like a constant drumbeat in those passages, and now **John shows us how the people of God conquer: we**

imitate Jesus' self-sacrificing love and proclaim that salvation belongs to our God and Jesus, the Lamb.

But more on that next week.

– EH

Thursday | Revelation 8:1-13

We've arrived with bated breath to the seventh seal. The tension has been mounting, God's people wait to see what will happen as Jesus breaks the final seal on the scroll. If Revelation is like a play, then picture what this moment would be like.

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

The lights go out; a hush falls over the crowd. For thirty minutes we figuratively hold our breath and wait. *And finally, seven angels enter stage left, holding seven trumpets in their hands.*

If we think back to the [analogy John is drawing from the Olympic Games](#), the trumpets signaled that the games could now officially begin. In the Hebrew Bible, trumpets signaled worship, could stand for the voice of God, or be used to warn that something was about to happen ([Joel 2:1](#), [Amos 2:2](#)). All signs point to the fact that God is about to move. This next scene tells us why.

An angel approaches the altar holding a golden censer (think bowl), and with it incense (representing the prayers of God's people). The smoke of these prayers rises up before God. Think about that for a moment. These prayers represent the cries of God's people on earth who are suffering under the oppression of the Beast. It's the same as when God told Cain that his murdered brother's blood cries out to him from the ground ([Gen. 4:9-11](#)). Or at the burning bush, when God tells Moses, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. **I have heard them crying out** because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering."

The effect of the smoke rising up to God is a reminder: **God hears the cries of His people, and when that happens, we can rest assured that God will act.** God cannot sit by and allow injustice to continue. Think about that for a moment. The prayers of the people on earth are reaching up to the very Throne room of God! How does that change your perspective on what it means to pray?

And so the angel takes the censer and now fills it with fire and casts it down on the earth. And there are "peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake." Anytime we see this interlude with thunder, rumblings, and lightning, think back to [Mount Sinai](#) (people are going to have an encounter with God). It also serves as a transitional moment, where the scene will shift ([see here for more examples in Revelation](#)).

The time has finally come for the trumpets to blow. But do you see how the story is setting up these trumpets? God is not going to act because he is a vengeful God, or because God is mean or somehow enjoys hurting people. God is going to act out of love for His people who are deeply suffering. We have a difficult time in our modern context understanding judgment. But as Elizabeth said earlier, we have to put ourselves in the shoes of the oppressed to understand why judgment is actually a good thing.

Michael Gorman says it this way, “What some of us need is not to question the cries of the oppressed, but **to feel more fully the realities of injustice, especially when it is perpetrated by the Babylons of our own day.**”

Now for the actual trumpets. One by one the angels come and blow the trumpets, and a new disaster reigns down on earth.

- Trumpet 1: hail, fire, and blood.
- Trumpet 2: the seas become blood.
- Trumpet 3: poisonous waters.
- Trumpet 4: darkness.

Do these remind you of anything? Over and over again, we’ve seen Revelation draw on the Exodus story, and it does so again now. These first four trumpet blasts (and more later) are going to parallel the plagues in Egypt. Check out our [Visual Guide to Plagues of Exodus](#) for a refresher. It’s not a one-to-one correlation, but it’s easy to see the similarities. Add to that stories like [Sodom and Gomorrah](#) and you have the idea of what’s going on here.

Revelation calls us to remember the reason the plagues happened in the first place. God orchestrates the ten plagues to let the Egyptians know who He is and warn them to set His people free. The plagues were a warning, an introduction, *and* an invitation to freedom. God tells Pharaoh to let His people go; God invites Pharaoh to repent of his ways and even gives the Egyptians chance after chance to come over to God’s side. But Pharaoh’s heart is hard (remember this for tomorrow).

For John’s original readers, the message is clear. *We’ve entered a new Exodus story!* God hears their cries and is going to act on their behalf, delivering them from oppression and darkness. They would’ve read this story as *good news*.

Now, the stage lights once again flash in warning and the sound of an eagle screeching echoes through the auditorium. We hear the booming voice of the eagle come over the speakers:

“Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!”

In other words, hang on to your seats! We’re just getting started. And what’s about to come is even more devastating than the trumpets we’ve witnessed thus far. Can you feel the tension growing?

– AJ

Friday | Revelation 9:1-21

Today we read about the first two of three woes that are befalling the earth. But before we dive in, it’s important to recenter ourselves around what is happening (and not happening).

Many have read these trumpet blasts as if they are predicting future events to come. But Revelation is not giving us a roadmap to the end of the world; it is conveying an important theological reality about the world.

Richard Bauckham says, “John has “taken some of his contemporaries’ worst experiences and worst fears of wars and natural disasters, blown them up to apocalyptic proportions, and cast them in biblically allusive terms. The point is not to predict a sequence of events. **The point is to evoke and to explore the meaning of the divine judgment which is impending on the sinful world.**”

Far from being a message to one generation at one random time in history (past or future), this is a message that echoes through *all generations*, because every generation can find themselves in this same situation where God’s people cry out as a result of the injustices of oppressive regimes.

The fifth angel now blows its trumpet. Leon Morris makes the case that as we move into the last three trumpet blasts, we enter the spiritual realm (whereas the first four took place in the “earthly” realm). The people have not turned from their ways as a result of the first four trumpet blasts.

Morris says, “When people fail to respond to God’s gracious invitation and set themselves in opposition to his purposes... they suffer the consequences of their choice.”

A star falls from heaven and opens a bottomless pit (or abyss). The abyss is associated with water, the chaotic seas that haunted the imagination of Jewish readers. The sea was the unknowable, unfathomable place where chaos and evil dwelt. The seas are anti-creation because before God began the work of creation in Genesis, there was only the deep. This image of the *chaotic waters* is going to be a major theme we will keep touching on throughout Revelation.

From within the abyss comes smoke, and from the smoke emerges a swarm of locusts that descend on the earth. In the ancient world, as in some places today, locusts are *bad news*. They swarm by the *trillions* and consume every living plant wherever they go, sowing devastation and starvation in their wake.

But these locusts do not harm the earth (these are not normal locusts, they are spiritual), they hunt people. But only people who “do not have the seal of God on their foreheads.” This is another theme that will come into play throughout Revelation. If you’re interested, there is a fantastic book that explores this idea by Carmen Imes, called [Bearing God’s Name](#) (it is worth adding to your summer reading list!).

In the book, Carmen explores what it means for God’s name to be on something. It’s a mark of ownership. In [Exodus 28](#), the high priest is described as bearing a seal on his forehead (or turban) that says: HOLY TO THE LORD (or in Heb. *belonging to God*). While the high priest wears this symbol physically, the reality it represents is true of all God’s people ([see Numbers 6](#)). To bear God’s name means we belong to God, and His reputation is now bound up with ours, meaning God must protect those who bear His name. And those who bear God’s name are duty-bound to represent God well through the way they live (more on that in future chapters). This is what the second of the Ten Commandments is all about: “You shall not take (or bear) the name of the Lord your God in vain.” In other words, *how you live matters*, a message we’ve already seen over and over in Revelation.

Like the final plague in Exodus, the locusts do not descend on God’s people, but on those who do not bear God’s name. The torment lasts five months, to the point where they wish for death. Again I think this is pointing to the reality we talked about earlier. Those who give themselves

over to the power of darkness will end up suffering the consequences of that darkness. This scene isn't describing a physical reality, but a spiritual reality.

These locusts belong to the abyss, the place of punishment and darkness, whose king is Abaddon (Heb.) or Apollyon (Grk.). N.T. Wright explains, "The Hebrew word means 'the place of destruction', and the Greek word means 'destroyer', indicating well enough the anti-creation energy here displayed." These are forces that *oppose* God's created order, leading to chaos, death, and destruction in the world.

N.T. Wright explains, "Throughout the vision John wants his readers to know that God and the lamb remain sovereign, **even though for evil to be finally conquered it has to be allowed to come out into the open and do its worst.**"

One woe down, two more to go as the sixth trumpet sounds.

As Elizabeth mentioned earlier, Rome's greatest enemy was the Parthian Empire, the only empire they couldn't defeat. The Euphrates River is what separated the Roman Empire from the Parthian Empire, acting as a physical barrier between the two. The image of Rome's greatest enemy is likely what Revelation is calling to mind in verses 14-19. These are the four horsemen come back to haunt them.

And then we get the highlight of chapter 9, the focal point of these trumpet blasts. We've read about the spiritual death and destruction wrought by these trumpet blasts. But despite God's attempts to wake the people up and get their attention, we're told, "The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, **did not repent.**"

These people who do not bear God's seal are still clinging to the works of their hands, to the worship of other gods and forces of darkness, and to the culture that breeds immorality and death. We're meant to see this as a great tragedy. Like Pharaoh, *their hearts are still hard*. Judgment alone will not lure them out of the pattern of death and sin.

This is the moment in the story where it seems like the heroes have lost, darkness has won. How can God bring renewal and restoration to a world that *loves* darkness? A world that is unwilling to let go of their own way of doing things, who does whatever is right in their own eyes and seeks to build their own kingdoms?

Revelation invites us to *hold on just a little bit longer*. Because the Lamb is coming. Darkness will not win in the end.

We think of repentance as a scary word, a churchy word we tend to brush aside or gloss over. But as N.T. Wright shares, "Repentance is more than just expressing regret for a few peccadilloes. It is a radical, heartfelt, gut-wrenching turning away from the idols which promise delight but provide death."

Where might God be calling you to *turn around* today? What are you clinging to?

Our culture is constantly inviting us to consider the works of our hands, to worship anything and everything apart from God. But to do so is to court death and invite disaster. This week, I want to encourage you to spend time in prayer really inviting God into the dark corners of your heart. Ask God to show you where you need to open your hands and turn around, or repent. Our weekly practice below will help you do just that.

Weekly Practice

All of us have areas where we need to *repent*, or turn around. This week, find a quiet place where you can spend a few moments in prayer using the words of Psalm 139 as your guide. Pray these words of the Psalmist and then simply listen. Be patient. Allow God to bring images or thoughts to your mind. Ask God to highlight places where you may be worshipping things that are not God, or trusting in the work of your own hands instead of trusting God.

*“Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.”*

To close, pray aloud before God the Prayer of Confession. This prayer is meant to be an act of humility and reconciliation, reminding us of our need for God’s endless mercy and grace, and our need to extend God’s mercy and grace to those around us.

*Merciful God,
We confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done and what we have left undone.
We have not loved You with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We justly deserve Your judgment.
For our sake, and the sake of your son, Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us.
Forgive us, renew us, and lead us,
so that we may delight in Your will
and walk in Your ways that lead to glory.
Amen.*

Reflection Questions

- What stuck out to you about the reading from this week? Was there a verse or idea that was particularly meaningful or challenging for you?
- What races do you find yourself running? In other words, what are you striving for? What are you dedicating your time, efforts, and energy toward? What prize are you hoping to achieve as a result?
- What words or images come into your mind when you think about God’s judgment? What purpose do you think God’s judgement serves?
- If God did not deal with evil, would God be just? Would God be God?
- When you experience challenges, problems, or difficulties, what methods do you commonly turn to in order to solve them? Do you identify more with *the hammer* or the *lamb*? In other words, do you view yourself as conquering with strength or sacrifice?

- Where are you hoping to experience God's deliverance in your life? Are there situations, relationships, or troubles you wish God would save you from? How is Revelation speaking to you in the midst of these things?
- As Christians, we bear God's seal on our foreheads. What does it mean, therefore, to live as people who represent God to the rest of the world?

Resources

- [God and the Ancient Roman Olympics](#) | Visual Guide | PDF
- [The Day of the Lord Theme Video](#) | Bible Project | Video
- [Visual Guide to Plagues of Exodus](#) | Alex Johnston | PDF
- [Guide to Revelation](#) | The Bible Project | Webpage
- [Revelation Overview \(Ch. 1-11\)](#) | The Bible Project | Video
- [Revelation Class](#) | Teaching Series with Rev. Walt Marcum
- [Reading Revelation Responsibly](#) | Michael J. Gorman | Commentary
- [Revelation for Everyone](#) | N.T. Wright | Commentary
- [Bearing God's Name](#) | Carmen Imes | Book