

**Introduction to Revelation**  
**Session III – Seals, Trumpets and Bowls (Rev 6-11; 16)**  
**June-July 2012**

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**Chronology of the Judgments**

Perhaps the first question to ask about the seals, trumpets and bowls is to what extent they ought to be understood as chronologically sequential events. A futurist reading of Revelation will typically interpret them as events that will happen one after another at some point leading up to the end of the world. There are a number of problems with this approach, and so many commentators take a different approach known as progressive recapitulation or parallelism.

Progressive recapitulation argues that the seals, trumpets and bowls all look at the same period of history from different angles, drawing particular theological conclusions. There are a number of reasons why this is a compelling option:

- Recapitulation is common in apocalyptic literature like Daniel, Ezekiel and Isaiah
- There are strong similarities between the content of the judgments
- There are repeated Judgment-Salvation patterns that happen at the conclusion of each of the sections throughout the book. (Rev 6:12-17 and 7:9-17; 11:18a and 11:18b; 14:14-20 and 15:2-4; 16:17-21, including 17:1-18:24, which functions as an intensified judicial conclusion to the whole book, and 19:1-10; 20:7-15 and 21:1-8, including the following section of 21:9-22:5, which serves as an intensified salvific conclusion to the entire book.)
- There are points in the middle of the book where the judgment appears to be complete. These passages are then followed by further accounts of judgment. For example:

**‘When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”’ (Revelation 6:12-17)**

This judgment appears to be pretty complete, with the whole sun, moon and stars affected and destroyed. And yet 8:12 goes on to speak about a third of the sun, moon and stars being struck, which suggests that 8:12 predates 6:12-17.

I would argue that we shouldn’t get too caught up on the order of the events:

‘This is one of the differences between writing something with words and writing it with music. In music, you can have several lines which all happen at the same time; but with words you have to say everything in sequence. This sevenfold sequence (four down, three to go, so far) is not chronological. It is an exposition of a sevenfold reality.’ (Tom Wright)

**Figurative Language**

We’ve already seen that Revelation uses a huge amount of figurative language. This is especially true when it comes to language of destruction and judgment. The OT regularly uses language that sounds like the end of the world in order to describe things that are going on in regular history.

For example, Joel 2 says:

**“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. And I will show**

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wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.” (Joel 2:28-32)

At Pentecost in Acts 2, Peter stands up and quotes this passage about the pouring out the Spirit. (For other examples, compare 2 Samuel 22 and Psalm 18. Also Isaiah 13:10-13; 24:1-6, 19-23; 34:4; Ezek 32:6-8; Hab 3:6-11 – Many of these verses refer to nations being judged and conquered).

**The Seals, Trumpets and Bowls**

**Group 1: The Seals**

- Read Revelation 6:1-17 and 8:1 and summarise the content of each seal
- Read Mark 13:7-31 and note how Jesus’ predictions parallel the content of the seals

The imagery of the horses seems to come from Zech 1:8-15, where four groups of coloured horses represent nations that God raises up to punish His people for their disobedience. In Zechariah the horses punish Israel more than they were meant to, and so God punishes them for their disobedience. The horses represent evil, which God has restrained, but is now allowing to run its course so that He can deal with it finally and decisively, once and for all.

The black horse has scales for measuring. The wheat and barley are 10 times the normal price. A denarius was a day’s wage for a day’s wage for a labourer, and a quart of wheat could just about feed a person. So the picture here is of regular people struggling to feed their families, whilst oil and wine, which are more luxury products, are not harmed. The poor can barely eat, but luxury items are still available for the rich. Economic disparity is only intensified.

**Group 2: The Trumpets**

- Read Revelation 8:7-9:21; 11:15-19 and summarise the content of each trumpet
- Read the verses in the Exodus column and note parallels between the plagues and the Trumpets

The background to the trumpets is the Exodus. Just as the Pharaoh’s heart was hardened through he plagues, we’re told that **‘The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts’ (Rev 9:20-21).**

The Exodus background reminds us that just as the people of God had to live in Egypt and endure the plagues, it was only temporary, and it was followed by God rescuing them, leading them to freedom. In the same way, God’s people will be rescued not *from* the events of the world but *through* them.

**Group 3: The Bowls**

- Read Revelation 16 and summarise the content of each bowl
- Read the verses in the Exodus column and note parallels between the plagues and the Bowls

Note the increased intensity in the judgments. The seals affect quarter of the earth, the trumpets a third and the bowls the whole Earth. This indicates that God is thoroughly and systematically dealing with evil and brokenness in every part of the world.

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	Seals		Trumpets		Bowls	
	Revelation	Mark 13	Revelation	Exodus	Revelation	Exodus
1	6:1-2	13:7	8:7	9:22-25	16:2	9:8-12
2	6:3-4	13:8a	8:8-9	7:20-25	16:3	7:20-25
3	6:5-6	13:8b	8:10-11		16:4-7	
4	6:7-8	13:8b	8:12	10:21-23	16:8-9	9:22-25
5	6:9-11	13:9-23	8:13-9:12	10:12-15	16:10	10:21-23
6	6:12-17	13:24	9:13-21		16:12-16	8:1-6
	Interlude: Security of the Church (Rev 7)		Interlude: Mission of the Church (Rev 10-11)			
7	8:1	13:26-31	11:15-19	19:16-19	16:17-21; 17-18	9:22; 19:16-19

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**Armageddon**

**“The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East. Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty. “Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.” Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon’ (Rev 16:12-16)**

The word *Armageddon* is a Greek form of two Hebrew words *Har Megiddon*, or *Mount Megiddo*. But rather than saying that a literal battle will take place at Megiddo, John appears to be using Mount Megiddo as a metaphor:

- Megiddo was actually built on a flat plain, not a mountain.
- In 14:20; 20:8-9 John places the battle outside Jerusalem, two days’ walk south of Megiddo.
- Joel 3 speaks about a similar battle taking place in a valley called ‘the valley of decision’ or ‘the valley of Jehoshaphat’ which means ‘the Lord will Judge’ (Joel 3:2, 12, 14).
- Megiddo was a well-known battlefield, where Israelites had been attacked at various points in their history (Judges 5:19; 2 Kings 23:29; 2 Chron 35:20-22)

The Euphrates River was Rome’s eastern border, and it was from this direction that armies had threatened throughout history.

**What about the Church? (Rev 7)**

Chapter 7 begins with four angels holding back four winds, which refer to the horses of chapter 6. The angels refuse to allow the judgments to be unleashed before the servants of God have been sealed.

A seal represents ownership and protection (see Ezekiel 9). The 144,000 are marked out as God’s own, and God promises to protect them through the trials of the church age.

144,000 is 12 x 12 x 1000. It represents the fullness of the people of God. (See chapter 21, in which the city, which represents the whole people of God has twelve gates, with twelve pearls and a wall that is 144 cubits tall, and twelve foundation stones on which are written the names of the apostles.)

Like in chapter 5, John ‘hears’ 144,000, but then when he ‘looks’ he sees ‘a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language’ (v9). In other words, the 144,000 are all who believe in Jesus - Jews and Gentiles alike. All are sealed and promised protection throughout the church age.

**“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. “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. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Rev 7:14-17)**

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		Seals			Trumpets			Bowls				
		Mark 13		Revelation		Exodus		Revelation		Exodus		
1		6:1-2	13:7	White Horse: Wars and conquest	8:7	Disasters on the Land: Hail, fire and blood	9:22-25	Plague 7: Hail and fire	16:2	Punishment on the Earth. Sores.	9:8-12	Plague 6: Boils
2	Four catastrophes	6:3-4	13:8a	Red Horse: International strife	8:8-9	Disasters at Sea: Fiery mountain, 1/3 of the sea turns to blood, 1/3 of the sea creatures died	7:20-25	Plague 1: The Nile turned to blood and the fish died. The water is undrinkable	16:3	Disasters on the Seas, turning them to blood.	7:20-25	Plague 1: The Nile turned to blood and the fish died. The water is undrinkable
3		6:5-6	13:8b	Black Horse: Famine and economic injustice	8:10-11	Disasters on the Rivers: Bitter, undrinkable water		16:4-7	Disasters on the Rivers: They turn to blood			
4		6:7-8	13:8b	Pale Horse: Death by famine, pestilence etc	8:12	Disasters in the Sky: Sun, Moon and Stars. Darkness.	10:21-23	Plague 9: Darkness	16:8-9	Bowl poured on the Sun, which scorches people	9:22-25	Plague 7: Hail and fire
5		6:9-11	13:9-23	Cry of martyrs	8:13-9:12	Woe, woe, woe! Locusts from the pit. Darkness	10:12-15	Plague 8: Locusts	16:10	Bowl poured on the throne of the Beast. Darkness.	10:21-23	Plague 9: Darkness
6		6:12-17	13:24	Cosmic shakings	9:13-21	Enormous army from the Euphrates			16:12-16	Bowl poured on the Euphrates. Frogs. Kings from the East attack	8:1-6	Plague 2: Frogs
7		8:1	13:26-31	Silence in Heaven: Divine Judgment	11:15-19	Interlude: Mission of the Church (Rev 10-11) Loud voices in Heaven. Lightning, thunder, earthquake. The end is announced and celebrated but not described	19:16-19	Sinai theophany. Lightning, thunder and earthquake. Trumpet.	16:17-21; 17-18	Thunder, lightning and an unprecedented earthquake. The end!	9:22; 19:16-19	Plague 7: Hail, lightning and fire. Sinai theophany