

THE LAMB, OUR SHEPHERD

Revelation 6:1-8:5

Key Verse: 7:17

“For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’”

When you hear “the book of Revelation,” what comes to your mind? The end times? The numbers “666” or “144,000”? The millennium, four horsemen, or beasts? Not many people would say, “throne,” “the Lamb,” “worship” or “witness” even though these are key words in the Revelation. Many books and movies, such as the “Left Behind” series, have popularized images from Revelation with their own interpretive bias. So there is a danger that we may approach the book of Revelation with preconceived ideas. Some people spend a lot of time trying to interpret details of the images and symbols, and decoding the numbers. The problem is that they miss the main point. Instead of finding God’s message of comfort and hope, they become nervous, fearful and distressed. So we should remember that apocalyptic literature is a message of hope to suffering people and should be interpreted figuratively, not literally.

Today’s passage describes God’s judgment and salvation. The main figure is the Lamb, who is on the center of the throne. The Lamb opens the seals of the scroll and releases God’s wrath as the Judge. The Lamb also cares for his people as a shepherd. Let’s see what the Lamb does.

First, the Lamb releases God’s wrath (6:1-17). We hope that the world will get better and better in every way. However, our Lord Jesus said that things will get worse and worse as he foretold the signs of the end of the age and his second coming (Mt 24, Mk 13, Lk 21:5-36). False messiahs appear who proclaim false peace. Jesus said, there will be wars, rumors of war, earthquakes, pestilences and famines in various places. The coronavirus is one of these signs. It has spread all over the world and frightened many people. Another is a mysterious plague of over 200 billion locusts that has swept through East Africa, crossed the Red Sea, and moved as far east as China. It caused Somalia to declare a national emergency. Recently, a deadly tornado devastated the city of Nashville, killing 25 people and shredding buildings. These are expressions of God’s wrath. We need to understand what this means to us. Jesus compared the world to a woman having birth pains which get increasingly harder to bear until new life is born. All these signs precede God’s final judgment. We see this final judgment beginning in this passage as the Lamb opens the seals one by one.

While Jesus was on earth, he became the Lamb of God who takes away our sins. Now this Lamb became the Judge of all creation. As he executes his judgments, our attention shifts from heaven to earth. When the Lamb opened the first seal, a living creature summoned a rider on a white horse, saying, “Come!” The rider armed with a bow, and given a crown, rode forth to conquer (1-2). Perhaps he represents political and military leaders, and satanic forces. They attempt to conquer the world through deception and false peace. When the second seal was opened, a fiery red horse came forth. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and

to make people kill each other. He was given a large sword (3-4). He symbolizes wars with much bloodshed. This corresponds to Jesus foretelling of wars and rumors of war, and that nation would rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom (Mk 13:7-8a).

At the opening of the third seal, a black horse came forth. Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand (5). The scales symbolize trade. An entire day's wages is needed to buy two pounds of wheat. Two pounds of wheat can produce one or two loaves of bread. The high prices of wheat and barley indicate famine caused by war (6). When the fourth seal was opened, a living creature summoned a pale horse. Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him (7-8a). They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth (8b). The judgments by the sword (red horse), famine (black horse) and plague (pale horse) work together and get worse and worse. Only by God's mercy, was his wrath measured and restrained so that only a fourth of the earth was being destroyed.

As we see the first four seals being opened, we are scared by the fierce riders on horses. But we don't need to be scared, because everything happens under the rule of the Lamb. The riders are summoned by living creatures, who are agents of the Lamb. In fact, the Lamb is Sovereign Ruler over all judgments that come upon the earth. When we see war, famine, pestilence, tornados, earthquakes, and pandemic sickness, they are not random accidents. They are God's judgments against the world because of sin. We should not be alarmed by these judgments, but trust in Jesus, the Lamb, who is the Sovereign Ruler.

The opening of the fifth seal reveals why the judgments had come upon the earth. It is to vindicate the souls who were slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained (9). We see in Christ's letters to the seven churches that the believers were threatened with persecution, even to death, under Roman rule. Throughout history, so many believers were martyred because of their testimony of Christ. Their killers thought they would never see them again. It seemed that the believers were victims of injustice and cruelty with no recourse. They cried, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (10) God is holy and true. God does not tolerate injustice indefinitely. God is living. He never abandons his people. He hears their cry. He does not vindicate them right away, but will surely do so according to his time schedule. Each of them was given a white robe. It was the symbol of victory. They were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been (11). This shows that God has a divine plan and that he uses the blood of martyrs to spread the gospel. For example, Acts reveals that through the martyrdom of Stephen the gospel spread to Samaria and Antioch, and also led to the conversion of St. Paul, who spread the gospel throughout the world. These days many brothers and sisters who have maintained their faith while living in North Korea, China and Muslim countries are crying out, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge...." Christ will surely hear their prayers and vindicate them in his time. Moreover, he will make their sufferings a great source of blessing to spread the gospel to the whole world.

When the sixth seal was opened, there was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place (12-14). This is the end of the world, which immediately precedes Jesus' second coming. Jesus said, "The sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. The stars will fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time, people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with power and great glory" (Mk 13:24-26). These days many false messiahs are appearing to comfort suffering people and plant false hope. They seem to work miracles, claiming, "I am the returning Messiah." Many people are deceived by them. But Jesus' second coming will not be like that. Before his coming we can see many cataclysmic signs. It will be the end of the world. The kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, will hide in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They will call the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?" (15-17)

God's final judgment is unbearable; no one can stand at that time. Many people joke about God's judgment as though it is a slap on the wrist, after which life goes on as before. They say, "All my friends will be in hell together with me. We will have fun together." But we should remember Lot's sons-in-law, who took the message of judgment as a joke. When fiery burning sulfur fell upon Sodom and Gomorrah, they were destroyed (Gen 19:14,24-25). God's final judgment is no joke; it is inevitable (2Co 5:10).

Second, the Lamb will be their shepherd (7:1-8:5). The question was raised at the end of chapter 6, "Who can withstand" the wrath of the Lamb? Chapter 7 tells us: Only the redeemed people of God can stand. This chapter is one of three interludes among the judgments of God which tell us what happens with his redeemed people (cf. 10:1-11:14; 20:1-6). In the midst of God's judgment, John saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth. They were holding back the four winds of judgment on the earth until all of God's redeemed people could receive his seal (1-3). The seal of the living God was placed on the foreheads of his servants. This seal refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in those who believe in Jesus. The Holy Spirit marks them as God's special possession. The Holy Spirit protects and guides them until the day of redemption (2Co 1:22; Eph 1:13; 4:30).

In verse 4, John heard the number of those who are sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. Some people say that this number refers to believing Jews. Others say that it refers to the "true Israel," the church. But one thing is clear: they are people redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. The number 144,000 appears once more in Revelation, where it refers to those who are purchased "from among mankind" (14:1-4). The number is symbolic; it signifies a vast international multitude of redeemed people (7:9; 21:12,14).

In verses 5-8 there is a list of the tribes of Israel. This list differs considerably from those in the Old Testament. The repetition of "from the tribe of" recalls the census lists of Israel as they organized for military conquest. The true Israel, the church, is thus depicted as ready to do

battle for God. They will fight like their leader, the kingly Lamb, who conquered through the cross. By maintaining their faith and witness through suffering, they overcome their foe, the devil and his hosts. They are those “who follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4).¹

From verse 9, the scene shifts from earth to heaven. John saw a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and the Lamb. While on earth, they were the church militant. They kept their faith through painful trials and testified to Jesus, fighting against satanic forces. Now they were in heaven, wearing white robes, which symbolize purity and victory. They were also holding palm branches in their hands to celebrate the Lamb’s triumph. They cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (10). Angels, elders and living creatures fell down on their faces before the throne and break out in a sevenfold doxology: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!” (11-12)

One of the elders asked John, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” (13) All John could say was, “Sir, you know.” He confessed that the Lord is the ultimate source of all knowledge. Then the elder said, “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” (14). Though they were dirty and stained with sin, when they simply believed in Jesus, their sins were washed away by the blood of Jesus. They were given clean white robes to wear. Because of their faith, they went through great tribulation. They never compromised because of fear or to avoid suffering. Rather, they remained true to Jesus. They were willing to lose their lives for Jesus and the gospel, and they emerged victoriously (Mk 8:35). Therefore, they were given the special privilege of being before God’s throne and serving him day and night in his heavenly sanctuary (15a). God himself will shelter them and provide all they need (15b-16). They will no longer suffer from hunger, thirst, or harm from the sun. Why? Let’s read verse 17: “For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’”

The striking thing is that the Lamb at the center of the throne is our shepherd. Jesus came into the world as a shepherd. His main work on earth was shepherding lost people. Once, Jesus went away with his disciples in a boat to a solitary place to have rest. More than 5,000 people saw Jesus leave. They ran to the place he was going and arrived ahead of him. They were very burdensome people. But when Jesus saw them, he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began teaching them many things. He also fed them (Mk 6:30-44). After serving innumerable people in this way, Jesus gave his life for the sheep by dying on a cross for our sins. After resurrection, he ascended into heaven and sat at the right hand of God. Now he is at the center of the throne as the Sovereign Ruler. But he is still a good shepherd for his people. He will lead us to the springs of living water so that we may be fully satisfied. As David did, we can confess, “The LORD is my Shepherd, I lack nothing” (Ps 23:1). Indeed, Jesus is our Good Shepherd forever! We human beings need a shepherd—not only while we are young, but also when we are old, and even in heaven. So we should hold

¹ Beale, G.K., with Campbell, David H., Revelation: A Shorter Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 2015), p. 151.

onto Jesus' hand now and always. Mother Barry frequently says, "Jesus is my shepherd; I hold on to his hand to the end of my life." Let's hold onto Jesus' hand to the end of our lives. No one can snatch us out of his hand.

In 8:1-5, the Lamb opened the seventh seal. The final judgment is so awful that all in heaven could not but fall silent for half an hour. John saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them (2). These will unleash the next series of God's judgments. God hears the prayers of his people and uses them in carrying out his divine judgments (3-5). That is why we should always pray and not give up (Lk 18:1).

As we have seen, the Lamb is both the Judge and the Shepherd. These days we see diseases spreading throughout the world, a shaking economy, political upheaval and natural disasters. These are not random events; they are precisely the beginning of God's divine judgment. When the final judgment comes, no one can stand. So we should take these signs of the end of the age as warnings. But we need not be afraid because the Lamb is our Good Shepherd. He will protect us and guide us and preserve our faith through his Holy Spirit. This does not mean that we will be exempt from suffering. Suffering comes in order to purify us. We should not compromise with sinful culture to avoid suffering. Rather we should hold onto gospel truth even to the point of death. Then the Lamb, our Shepherd, will care for us and lead us to the throne of God, where we worship and serve him forever.