The Context Bible

Life Group Lesson 46 November 10, 2014 – November 16, 2014

Revelation 6-7

Have you ever wished the Bible was easier to read through like an ordinary book – cover to cover? Because the Bible is a collection of 66 books, reading it like an ordinary book is quite difficult. Compounding this difficulty is the fact that the later writers of the New Testament were often quoting or referencing passages in the Old Testament. In fact, much of the New Testament makes better sense only if one also considers the Old Testament passages that place the text into its scriptural context.

You are reading a running commentary to The Context Bible. This arrangement of Scripture seeks to overcome some of these difficulties. Using a core reading of John's gospel, the book of Acts, and the Revelation of John, the Context Bible arranges all the rest of Scripture into a contextual framework that supports the core reading. It is broken out into daily readings so that this program allows one to read the entire Bible in a year, but in a contextual format.

Rather than providing the normal running commentary, this lesson covers material that is read later, so that the lesson will correspond with the preaching of the home church for these lessons. No Life Groups meet the last two Sundays of the year in the home church, so without this modification, the classes would fail to cover the end of Revelation that brings human history to a VICTORIOUS conclusion. Sorry for the change! The lessons will still provide the reading schedule to complete the one-year Bible plan (week 46 here with week 47 attached). Covered readings are noted in the text of this handout.

Week Forty-Six Readings

11/10 The Letter to Sardis	11/11 The Letter to Sardis	11/12 The Letter to Philadelphia	11/14 The Letter to Philadelphia
Rev 3:1-3:6	Cont'd	Rev 3:7-3:13	Cont'd
	Rev 3:1-3:6		Rev 3:7-3:13
1 Pet 4:1-4:11		1 Jn 5:16-5:21	
1 Pet 4:17-4:19	Jas 2:14-2:26	Isa 22	Pslm 97
Ezek 7	Jas 3:1-3:17	Job 12	2 Chron 25
Pslm 137	Prov 18:21		2 Chron 27-28
	Prov 16:14-16:18, 16:20-16:22	11/13 The Letter to Philadelphia	
11/11 The Letter to Sardis	Prov 22:10-22:14	Cont'd	11/15 The Letter to Laodicea
Cont'd	Prov 25:23	Rev 3:7-3:13	, Rev 3:14-3:22
Rev 3:1-3:6	Prov 22:7-22:8, 16		2 Pet 2
Eccles 9		Col 4:2-4:4	Hos 12
Prov 22:29		Isa 45:14-45:21, 45:24-45:25	Heb 12:1-12:17
1 Pet 3		Jer 1	Luk 12:13-12:21
Prov 22:19-22:21		Ezek 48	
Prov 25:15			
			11/16 Off

BACKGROUND

As we continue working through the Revelation of John, we are reminded of the need to understand it in light of the era of its origination. The book was written to certain churches (seven in Asia Minor) that would have read it in their own experience and, hopefully, have understood it. After all, the name "Revelation" implies a "revealing." Having said that, we have already illustrated that the number seven was significant for symbolizing a totality. The revelation was not only for the seven specified churches, but was also for the church in its fullest sense, including the church throughout history.

So we are reading the Revelation with an eye toward the symbolism as it would have been understood by its first audience, much of which draws its source from the Old Testament. As far back as Eusebius (c.260-c.339A.D.), the Greek text of Revelation was considered very stilted Greek that was much more Hebraic in its reading style than true Greek. The book is very reliant upon the Old Testament for its symbols, ideas, and even structure.

There are many modern ideas on how to understand and study the book. We do not recite all of those in these lessons, but we do try to illustrate some of the differences where it matters on the issues as discussed. While there are legitimate and fair disagreements among well-schooled scholars on the approaches and layout of the book, there is really no disputing the overall theme. The book emphatically proclaims that God sits enthroned over all of history, and that God has ensured the destiny of his children through the Lamb who conquered death and redeemed his people by his shed blood.

STRUCTURE

Recognizing that differences in the structure of the book, and the corresponding differences in interpretation, exist among scholars, we nonetheless must use a structure for this set of lessons. For this lesson, we consider chapters 6 and 7, but understand them in light and context of chapters 4 and 5. With Revelation 6, we begin the unsealing of the scroll that we read of in Revelation 4 and 5. This scroll is full of history—the good and bad. It especially contains the protection and events relevant to God's people. John wept at first, concerned no one was worthy to open those seals. The only one worthy was the Lamb of God who actually secured the protection of God's people!

With Revelation 6, the opening of the seven seals begins. Like many of the "sevens," these seals are divided into a group of four and a group of three. The first four are horsemen followed by three other seals.

Our suggested structure for this section is that set out by New Testament scholar William Hendrikson (1900-1982), with some modification, in his book *More Than Conquerors*. In this sense, we see core sections of Revelation repeating their scope of history, although each succeeding section seems to add a bit more extension to that scope. As these lessons unfold, the structure will become more clear. For purposes of this lesson, however, we can simply state that the seals opened in chapters 6 and 7 relate in time to the time of Christ through times of tribulation into the time that shows the church triumphant. This same timing will be repeated in the next sections.

For a similar structural set up, consider the apocalyptic sections of Daniel. In Daniel chapter 7 we read of four beasts that represent coming kings, likely with the leopard representing the Greek Empire under Alexander the Great. Then in Daniel 8 we read again of the same future, but this time in a vision of a battling ram and goat. The ram has two horns, representing the Medes and Persians, while the goat is Alexander's Greek conquest. Then again in Daniel 11, we read of the coming successive kingdoms from another approach and in different detail.

So as we read the section of Revelation 6 and 7, one way to understand it is as a revelation of what would happen to the church and history between the first and second coming of Christ.

Revelation 6 - The Scroll and Seals (**Revelation 6**; Zechariah 1:7-1:21; 6:1-6:8; Ezekiel 4-6; 14:12-14:23; Leviticus 26:14-26:46; Deuteronomy 31:30-32:3, 31:5-31:52; Psalm 79; 119:81-119:88; Isaiah 5; 34; Nahum 1; Matthew 24:15-24:41, 24:45-24:51)

In Deuteronomy 31:30-32:52, we read of Moses delivering a song to the assembly of Israel. Moses' song is about the greatness of the LORD God. All of earth is to hear of this greatness. God is not simply one who sits removed from earth; he is active and integral to all that happens, and is interested in his people and all humankind. God divided mankind and fixed the borders of nations (v. 8). He cared for his chosen people offering them protection and guidance (v. 10-14). The Lord also brought judgment and discipline when his people took him for granted and rebelled against him (v. 15-43). History evidences God's interest in people, both past and future. In Revelation, John sees a scroll written on both sides, chock-full of God's plans and involvement in our world. John is eager to have the scroll opened.

As the scroll of God's eternal plan is opened, it is done by the successive removal of each seal. Seals served multiple purposes in the ancient world. Scripture shows us three usages that are relevant to the seals on the Revelation scroll. First, seals protected

_

¹ This book was initially published in 1939 and is still in print today. Hendrikson was the principal translator of the book of Revelation for the New International Version. Hendrikson's ideas are used in multiple places in this lesson.

the scroll from unwarranted tampering. There could be no snooping of the contents. Only certain people had authority to open a seal and disclose the contents. We see this same usage of a seal on the tomb of Jesus in Matthew 27:66. It was intended to protect the tomb against tampering (Matt 27:66). A second usage of seals was to mark the source or ownership of that which was sealed. In the Song of Solomon we read of a seal as indicating this bonding of one to another (Song 8:6). A third usage of a seal is to verify authenticity of the matter. Kings wore signet rings used in the sealing process to certify that the contents are genuine (Esth 3:12).

Each of these purposes also gives greater understanding to the need for the right person to open the seals. Not just anyone was qualified or worthy to do so. The opening of the first four seals produce horsemen, commonly called "the four horsemen of the apocalypse." Horsemen are a novelty to us, but in Biblical times, they were a typical way for emissaries and forces to move about the world. We read of horses in association with kings and armies (Ex 15:1; 1 Kgs 20:20; Pslm 33:17; Prov 21:31) as well as kings and their emissaries (Esth 6:8-6:11). In Zechariah 1:7-1:21 the prophet sees a man on a red horse in the midst of other red, sorrel (reddish-brown), and white horses. These horses were described to Zechariah as those whom God sent to "patrol the earth." Later in Zechariah 6, we read of four chariots pulled by red horses, black horses, white horses, and dappled horses being sent out in judgment after presenting themselves to the Lord.

Passages like these help us understand the images and associations of those images. As we consider Revelation's horsemen of the apocalypse, it does not seem fair to assert that these horsemen are the specific horses of Zechariah tied to an exact event. These are images in a vision that symbolize ideas and even events, but we must always be cautious assigning a specific event rather than a general concept of events.

In Revelation 6, the first seal is opened and one of the four creatures summons a rider with, "Come!" Out comes a rider on a white horse. The rider has a bow, is given a crown, and comes out "conquering and to conquer" (Rev 6:2). Some understand this figure to be Christ, some a satanic character, and still others, simply a messenger of divine judgment. Based upon the structure set out in this and subsequent lessons, this figure is most suitably seen as Christ. This places the narrative in the context of Jesus as victor riding forth from the grave, still working to conquer strongholds. ("conquering and to conquer"). Consider also the following, consistent with this horseman as Christ:

- The language closely charts Pslm 45:3-45:5, especially as written in the Septuagint where the victorious king rides forth with a bow.
- White is always, without exception, a color of the holy in Revelation. (See Rev 1:14; 2:17; 3:4; 3:18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9; 7:13; 14:14; 19:11; 19:14; 20:11).

- Crowns are assigned in Revelation only to God and his people (See Rev 2:10; 3:11; 12:1; 14:14).
- The language John used for Jesus as conqueror (nikao νικάω) is the same John used in translating Jesus' Hebrew tongue in John 16:33 ("In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome ["conquered"] the world.").
- There is too much similarity between this rider and the rider in Revelation 19:11 ff who also comes on a white horse with crowns, with armies arrayed in white to strike down the nations. The rider in Revelation 19 is clearly identified as Jesus.
- As these lessons unfold, we will also see that subsequent cycles of visions also start out with Christ's ministry on earth before transitioning to the events affecting the church. In other words, this understanding of the passage as referencing Christ is consistent with a parallel reading of the other passages.

The second seal is opened and a second creature cries "Come!" Then a second rider comes on a red horse, and he is "to take peace from the earth." He is given a "great sword" so that "people should slay one another" (Rev 6:4). With Jesus as the first rider and seal, it should come as no surprise that the second seal is one of persecution. Over and over in history, and certainly in the church at the time of John, persecution follows Christ's work. While scholars disagree as to the persecution imaged by this rider, we suggest it is actually a reference to the persecution and killing of believers by non-believers in the world. Consider the following:

- The word for "slay" $(sphazo \sigma\phi \acute{\alpha} \zeta \omega)$ is the same term used five verses later to reference the martyrs "slain" for the "word of God" (Rev 6:9).
- The word translated "great sword" (*machaira* μάχαιρα) referenced the short sword used for sacrifices, not a battle sword like we read of in Rev 6:8 (*hromfaia* ῥομφαία).
- This understanding certainly fits John's immediate audience that was faced with death by the world's authorities.

Opening the third seal has a third creature proclaiming, "Come!" followed by a rider on a black horse. He carries scales and proclaims expensive prices for wheat, barley, oil and wine. This horse reflects economic troubles that also accompany many persecuted for their faith. Over and over in history, we read of this, if not actually experiencing it ourselves.

We can consider passages like Ezekiel chapters 4 through 6 as reflective of this pattern. Ezekiel prophesied of God's judgment and wrath coming against his people. Before we

consider it, we must note that the Ezekiel passage does not seem to be directly referenced by John, for it is a passage of God's judgment against his rebellious people. In Revelation 6 and 7, we read of God's "protected" people suffering the persecution, but the protection is eternal security, not isolation from earthly turmoil. Ezekiel sets out a pattern of warring, economic hardship (explained as affecting food supplies of wheat, barley, and more.

The fourth seal opens and the fourth creature says "Come!" Then out rides a "pale" (Greek *chloros* χλωρός - a sickly green color actually) horse with Death as its rider. He was given authority over one-fourth of the earth to kill in four specified ways, by "sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth" (Rev 6:8). (We remind readers that four was a number symbolic of the earth.) This rider is war. His killing is not the sacrificial slaughter of the earlier rider, but is rather killing by the sword as is seen in war. Ezekiel 14:12-14:23 contains similar language when describing the war coming upon Jerusalem. Ezekiel expressed the coming war as one of famine (v. 13, 21), sword (v. 17, 21), pestilence (v. 19, 21), and wild beasts (v. 15, 21). The summation verse of Ezekiel 14:21 sets out the same grouping as Revelation's fourth horseman, also using "four" symbolically in the process:

For thus says the Lord GOD: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence.

These elements would also have echoed God's judgments warned of in Leviticus 26:14-26:46. God had long warned his people that rebellion would bring judgment of famine (v. 20, 26, 29, 32), the sword (v. 25, 33), pestilence (v. 25), and wild beasts (v. 22).

Although he was unleashed to ride, it would have brought great comfort to John's readers, and should to us today, that even this rider is held in check. God has set up boundaries beyond which the horse cannot ride. This horse is limited (imaged by the reference to one-fourth of the earth).

After this group of four horsemen announced by the four creatures, we move to the other set of seals. The fifth seal is opened and John sees "the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God" (Rev 6:9). These cried out asking the Sovereign Lord how long before he judged and avenged the shed blood. Their cries echo Psalm 79, a psalm of distress by those who are victims of pagan abuse. In the psalm, the foreign nations have invaded the land, defiling God's temple, killing God's servants, and turning out those surviving the invasion to die before the beasts of the earth, feeding the vultures and similar birds. The psalmist cries out, "How long?" before God sends his

² John has already assured the churches, however, that those who are living in active rebellion to God will experience God's judgment and discipline. (See, e.g., the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira in Rev 2:12-2:29).

atonement for sin and salvation, avenging the bloodshed. Importantly, the psalmist is not calling for revenge because it was due the victims, like Psalm 119:81-119:88. The judgment is called for because of the offensiveness of the behavior *toward God*! It is for God's "name's sake" (Pslm79:9). The real taunts were not against God's servants; they were against God himself! (Pslm 79:12).

This is the cry of the martyred. They are not seeking judgment because they were wronged and deserving of justice. The martyred see the offense against God who is "holy and true" (Rev 6:10). In response, the martyred were given white robes and told to rest a bit longer until the numbers to be martyred were complete. God's justice comes, but in God's timing!

The sixth seal is then opened and six signs affect six groups:³

Six Signs	Six Groups	
1. An earthquake happens	1. Kings of the earth	
2. The sun became black	2. "Great ones"	
3. The moon became like blood	3. The rich	
4. The stars fell as figs from a tree	4. The powerful	
5. The sky rolls up like a scroll	5. Slaves	
6. The mountains and islands are moved	6. Free people	

The six groups (which comprise people from all walks of life) cry out in terror perceiving the wrath of the Lamb. They hide in caves, and cried out for the rocks to go ahead and kill them to save them from the wrath of the Lamb! (Rev 6:15-6:17).

In Matthew 24, we read of God's judgment of rebellion as Jesus spoke in very apocalyptic terms. Many scholars equate much of that prophetic promise of Jesus as fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem to Roman forces in the first and second centuries. Many of these scholars see Jesus weaving the prophesy about Jerusalem's destruction into the ultimate destruction and final judgment of God on earth associated with the second coming of Christ. We do not have to understand Matthew 24 precisely to see

7

³ "Six" is an important number in Revelation. E.g., the "number of man" and the beast is 666 (Rev 13:18).

the fearsome language and imagery that is echoed by John in describing his revelation. Jesus described a great time of persecution that would be worse than anything experienced before (v. 21). Matthew 24:29 speaks of a coming day when the "sun will be darkened" (John's second sign set out in the chart above), when the moon would not give off light (akin to John's third sign), and the stars will fall from heaven (John's fourth sign). Jesus spoke of the Son of Man coming on clouds of heaven and the angels gathering the elect from the four winds.⁴

It is a fearsome thing to fall into the judgment of God. Isaiah chapter 5 sets out the personal difficulties sustained when God's judgment descends. In the chapter, Isaiah was prophesying about the fall of Judah, and he placed the judgment into language of six "woes."

- "Woe to those who join house to house [i.e., are greedy]" (v. 8).
- "Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may run after strong drink...but do not regard the deeds of the LORD" (v. 11-12)
- "Woe to those who draw iniquity... who draw sin" (v. 18).
- "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil" (v. 20).
- "Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes" (v. 21).
- "Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine... who acquit the guilty for a bribe" (v. 22).

The woe is God's judgment! He will stretch out his hand and strike (v. 25). Corpses will lie in the street as garbage (v. 25). The judgment God calls forth will be

But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming (Matt 24:36-24:42).

Others see this passage as referencing the day of destruction where, like Noah, some are saved and lifted from earth, while others remain to die, rather than being left to survive in a time of tribulation.

⁴ The Matthew 24 passage contains language that some explain as the "rapture," a time where God redeems those saved, while leaving non-believers to endure an extended time of tribulation on earth.

unrelenting and unbeatable. It is a judgment from which "none can rescue" (v. 26-29). It is vividly portrayed as a time of darkness and distress (v. 30).

Similarly Isaiah 34 sets out God's judgment upon nations beyond Judah. "The LORD is enraged against all the nations and furious against all their host" (v. 2). Isaiah saw God "devoting them for destruction" and "giving them to slaughter" (v. 2). In the blunt prophetic language, the slain are cast outside rather than buried, and their stench fills the streets as their blood flows over the land. Using an image given to John as well, the "skies roll up like a scroll" as the "host of heaven" rots away and falls as "leaves fall from the vine" and the "fig tree" (v. 4).

All can confidently know—a judgment day is coming. It is a fearful time for those facing it. As Nahum 1 sets out in an oracle of God's judgment against Nineveh, when his judgment comes, no one can stand before it. No one can "endure the heat of his anger" (v. 6), unless they have taken refuge in him (v. 7). The protected are explained in Revelation as the ones who have trusted in the Lamb.

From this judgment day, John then moves into the final scene in this initial montage of visions – that of the sealed multitude and the church triumphant.

Revelation 7 - The Sealed Multitude (Revelation 7; Jeremiah 49:34-49:39; Ezekiel 9; Romans 11:1-11:36; Psalm 23, 121, 129; Proverbs 16:5; Isaiah 1:1-1:5, 1:8-1:31; 4:2-4:6; Zechariah 3; Numbers 26; 1 Chronicles 2, 4-7)

At this point in the seals, there is a pause and John has another vision before the seventh seal is opened. In this vision, four angels are standing at earth's four corners, holding back the four winds. Another angel arises with the sun with a seal of God telling the fours angels not to unleash their destruction until the foreheads of God's servants were sealed.

We read in this an intense set of numbers that are graphic representations of how numbers were used in symbolic ways in John's time. The "four corners of earth" and "four winds" are references to four as the "earthly number," representing its fullness. In like manner, Jeremiah 49:34-49:39 speaks of the Lord bringing "the four winds from the four quarters of heaven."

We should also see the echo of Ezekiel 9 in the sealing of God's servants. In Ezekiel 9, God sends one through the city to place a mark on the foreheads of those who are appalled and saddened by the sins of Jerusalem. Then others are sent in to slaughter and kill those that *do not bear the mark or seal of the Lord*.

The sealed are called/numbered as 12,000 from Israel's 12 tribes (Num 26; 1 Chron 2, 4-7). In ancient symbolism, twelve was a very complete number. It was in many ways an equivalent of the number seven. While seven comes from adding the earthly

number four to the spiritual number three, twelve comes from multiplying four and three. The "thousand" addition to a number brings an added measure of fullness. It is ten times ten times ten. It is the amount in a cube of "tens," full on every side.

So in these twelve thousands from twelve tribes, we have the fullness of Israel's chosen before God. They join an uncountable multitude from all nations, tribes and peoples standing before the Lamb and throne clothed in white⁵ and holding palm branches. They cry out praise to God sitting on the throne and to the Lamb for "salvation" (Rev. 7:10). Angels, the four living creatures, and the elders all fell down in worship as well.

This vision reinforces the assurance of Paul in Romans 11:1-11:36 that not only are Gentile nations present as God's people, "grafted into the tree," using Paul's analogy, but there is also to be a redemption among the Jews such that "all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:26). Even as Isaiah wrote of God striking down the Jews in judgment (Isa 1:1-1:5, 1:21-1:25), there was always an assurance that God would preserve a remnant of his people (Isa 1:9, 1:26-1:27). The "branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious" (Isa 4:2).

In a dialogue, an elder explains to John that the innumerable clothed in white were those whose robes were washed in the blood of the Lamb. From that moment forward, they live in the presence of God who wipes away their tears. This scene is an affirmation to psalms like Psalm 121, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth!" Though God's people suffer affliction, affliction will not prevail before our righteous LORD (Pslm 129).

John saw clearly God's people shepherded by the Lamb! It is a delightful inversion of the general idea of the person who shepherds the sheep. Here it is the Lamb shepherding the people! This gives a special meaning to Psalm 23, "The LORD – the Lamb – is my shepherd, I shall not want!" These are protected from the judgment.

QUESTIONS

-

⁵ Satan may accuse Jerusalem and God's chosen people for the sin and "filthy garments" (Zech 3:1-3:3), but the Lord will take away those filthy garments of iniquity and clothe his people with pure garments Zech 3:4-3:5).

⁶ We must always remember that the Greek word "all" generally means "all" within a group context. So, for example, when "all Jerusalem" came out to be baptized by John, Scripture does not mean every single solitary individual who was in Jerusalem. It means all who came out came out! In today's language, it is like when we say, "You should have been at the party...everyone was there!"

- 1. Consider and discuss the idea of ancient seals. In what way can we see the three purposes set out in the lesson fulfilled by the Godhead? How does the Father fulfill the purpose of seals as protecting that which is sealed? How does Jesus fill the role of one who is bonded to or who owns the one sealed? How does the Holy Spirit function to verify the authenticity of the one sealed?
- 2. Have you ever had to suffer economically because of your faith? If so, how does the assurance of God's triumph bring a peace that trumps the tribulation or suffering?
- 3. "Shepherded by the Lamb" Discuss!!!!

Week Forty-Seven Readings

11/17 The Letter to Laodicea	11/19 The scroll and the Lamb	11/21 The Seven Seals Cont'd
Rev 3:14-3:22	Rev 5	Rev 6
Isa 20 Pslm 94 Prov 16:25-16:33 Jer 22 Prov 19:10 11/18 The Heavenly Throne Rev 4 Isa 6:1-6:8 Pslm 11 Ezek 1 Gen 9:8-9:17 Ezek 10 Pslm 99	Dan 12 Pslm 141 Gen 49:1 Gen 49:8-49:12 Gen 11:1-11:9 Gen 10 11/20 The Seven Seals Rev 6 Zech 6:1-6:8 Ezel 4-5	Lev 26:14-26:46 Ezek 6 Deut 31:30-32:3 Deut 32:5-32:52 11/22 The Seven Seals Cont'd Rev 6 Pslm 79 Pslm 119:81-119:88 Isa 34 Nah 1 11/23 Off