

FGBC: Lamb of Thrones: Prayer's Mystery

Revelation 6:1-17; 8:1-5

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The internet is full of all sorts of terrible things along with a whole bunch of cute kittens and crazy things kids say. And since I'm a dad I'm partial to the latter. Here are a couple prayers kids were recorded praying:

Debbie, age 7, prayed: "Dear God, please give mom a new brother. The one I've got whines too much."

Angela, age 8, prayed: Dear God, This is my prayer. Could you please give my brother some brains? So far he doesn't have any."

Something about kids being sinners resonates with me. But what also resonates with me is the question: have you ever felt like God wasn't answering your prayer? If you have you're not alone.

The New Testament gives two strong examples of unanswered prayer. Jesus pled three times for God to "Take this cup from Me." And Paul begged God to cure the thorn in his flesh. And both times God said no. Not because the prayers weren't prayed right. Not because the people who prayed them weren't in the right place. But because God had a plan that included suffering. So what do you do when your prayers don't seem to be being answered?

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Alright, please grab your Bible and open to the book of Revelation chapter 6. We've been in Revelation for a couple months now and this is a very important book. It's the last book of the Bible written, and it was written into an incredibly tumultuous time for Jesus followers. Property was being confiscated. People were dying. And governments were seeking to stamp out the faith.

And Jesus' gift to the church at this time was the book of Revelation. Its purpose was to let people know that no matter how bad things get Jesus is in control. And it worked. Instead of shriveling up as everyone expected, the church grew by leaps and bounds.

Now, for the last two weeks we've looked at the Lion who reigns like the Lamb. Which means Jesus is in control, but He isn't using His control to hurt people, He's using His control to take the hurt of the world upon Himself. And this is why evil and suffering remain while Jesus reigns. Jesus is reigning but He isn't forcing Himself on us. He is allowing us to choose Him. And when we don't then evil and suffering result. But this doesn't thwart His plans, He uses even this to accomplish His purposes.

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Alright, we are in chapter 6 today and here the excitement really begins. When I opened my commentaries to study this week the first words I read were: “It is at this point – at ‘the breaking of the seven seals’ – that most people stop reading Revelation... [and] most preachers stop preaching.”¹ And I thought, “Oh boy, here we go.”

Of course the reason for this is that we start getting into a bunch of symbols and images several of which aren’t obviously clear. And so I want to let you know up front where I’m going to place my emphasis.

My passion is with Jesus. I want to grow in Christlikeness, and I want to see you do the same. To this end my job isn’t to give you a bunch of interesting information about the Bible – that’s not what we are doing here. I want us to fall in love with Jesus. And so when I open the Bible and start studying I’m always doing a couple things.

First, I’m looking to unpack what the text says because the text points us to Jesus. So my goal is that you leave here not learning new stuff, but feeling Jesus’ love and wanting to bring your life more in line with Him and His blessing. (Jesus made this place. So when we live His way it goes ultimately good for us even if there is suffering involved.)

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But there is a second conviction I bring with me to the text, and that is that I always want to focus on what is clear. And the meaning behind the vast majority of scripture is clear when we look at the context and work out what the author was attempting to say. But there are some texts where the meaning is not clear.

And the danger with difficult texts is that people can make up whole doctrines based on them when we aren’t even sure what they mean. I don’t want to do that. So when I come to one of those texts I try to focus on what is clear, and then acknowledge where the clarity ends. My conviction is that the main point is clear and what is difficult to understand, or intentionally left a mystery, is that way on purpose.

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Alright, would you stand with me as we read Revelation 6 and the first 5 verses of Revelation 8. Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Revelation 6:1-7; 8:1-5]

Now as we get started I want to remind you what this book is called – it’s called “Revelation” or “Apocalypse”. Now the pop culture definition of ‘apocalypse’ refers to disasters that kill everyone and essentially end life as we know it.

But the word ‘apocalypse’ literally means “unveiling” or “revealing”. This book is about lifting a cover, or pulling back a curtain so we can understand the mysteries of life.

¹ Outline adapted from Darrell Johnson “Discipleship on the Edge” (Vancouver, Regent College Press), 2004. Pg 166

And the world we live in is full of mystery. For example, ‘what is the meaning of life?’ Or ‘how can a good God exist while evil and suffering run rampant?’ Or ‘when is Jesus coming back?’ And Revelation speaks to these mysteries and pulls back the curtain. But it does this like Penn and Teller do it on their magic show “Fool Us.”

If you haven’t seen Penn and Teller they are all over the internet. But the premise behind their show is that all magic is slight of hand – things aren’t what they seem.

And so aspiring magicians come on this show and try to fool Penn and Teller with their tricks. But these guys have been doing magic a long time so it’s not easy. And so each episode ends with Penn and Teller explaining to the magician how they did their trick. But they speak in code revealing just enough to prove they know what’s going on while not giving away the trick to the audience.

And this is what Jesus is doing in John’s apocalypse. He is showing that He is in control of the mysteries of the universe, but He isn’t giving away the “trick” to it yet.

So Revelation does tell us Jesus is in control and coming back. And it does tell us that He has a plan behind all the suffering we experience. But it doesn’t unpack when this is going to happen or exactly what this plan is – mystery remains. And so in this series I’m not going to do that either. Fair?

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Alright, let’s look at the opening of the seven seals on the scroll. This is God’s plan for bringing about His purpose in creation. And what is clear is that this is a picture of judgement. God *is* causing justice to be handed out.

Now the reason I say “is” instead of “will” is that there is no indication in the text that this is future. It’s totally written in the present tense and is something the Lamb on the throne from chapter 5 does. There will be a future aspect to the Lamb’s judgment, but for now this chapter gives meaning to live as we know it.

So in verses 2 through 8 we get the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. This is one of the most famous pictures in Revelation – everyone knows about the horses. But what everyone knows about these horses is a bit up in the air.

So let’s focus on what isn’t up in the air. These horsemen are bringing God’s judgment on the world. And we know this because Jesus releases them by opening the seals. So these horses work for Jesus.

But they aren’t doing nice things! How can they work for Jesus? Bloody conquest, the removal of peace, financial bondage and death aren’t things we associate with God. This is Satan’s domain. And that’s the point.

These horses don't think they work for Jesus. In fact throughout scripture Death is described as the final enemy that God is going to destroy.² So these horses are enemies of God, but that's okay because every difficulty and evil we face plays into God's plan – The Lamb is opening the seals.

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Now here's where there is a bit of debate. Some people think that the first horse and rider are Jesus because it's white and the rider has a crown. And certainly in other places in Revelation Jesus is pictured like this. For example in Revelation 19 we read:
 Then I saw heaven opened, and a white horse was standing there. Its rider was named Faithful and True.... His eyes were like flames of fire, and on his head were many crowns. (Revelation 19:11-12)

But there are problems with making the rider in chapter 6 Jesus. The biggest problem is that he's about conquest, and in the rest of Revelation conquest is always the Beast's domain. This is something Satan sets out to do. In contrast Jesus doesn't have anything to conquer because He's already on the throne. It's Satan who is resisting.

But the horse is white? Yeah. And one of Satan's chief weapons is masquerading as an angel of light. And so here an anti-Christ figure is riding a white horse. But don't panic, Jesus saw this coming. In Matthew 24 we read:

Jesus told them, "Don't let anyone mislead you, for many will come in My name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah.' They will deceive many. And you will hear of wars and threats of wars, but don't panic... these things must take place, but the end won't follow immediately.
 (Matthew 24:4-6)

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Isn't it hilarious how well Jesus knows us? At the first sign of difficulty our response is panic! But Jesus says "many enemies are coming. And they are going to look like they are on My side. But don't be taken in by their tricks."

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One more thing here. Did you notice that in verse 2 the crown is given to the rider – it's not a crown he has won. Evil is on a leash.

It's like when Satan approached God and asked permission to torment Job – remember that? And God allowed it – why? Not because He was giving in to Satan but because He wanted to use this tool to accomplish His means. In the end Satan's plan to destroy works out for Job's good and God's glory. That's the good news.

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On the heels of the white horse a red horse and rider enter. Red is the colour of blood. And he sets about taking peace away wherever he can. War, strife – you name it he does it.

² 1 Corinthians 15:26

And then we get a black horse and rider who carry a pair of scales and bring in some exorbitant prices. Just enough food to survive for a day's wage, but the wine and oil aren't affected. I think this means the poor don't have enough while the wealthy get what they want. It's a picture of greed and injustice leading to hunger and famine.

And finally the fourth horse; Death personified riding through the earth gathering corpses with Hades on his tail sending them to hell. A brutal picture.

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Friends, the Lamb is on the throne but the enemy is doing his worst to fill the earth with evil and suffering. Doesn't this make sense of the world you look out at? Aren't fires wrecking havoc and missiles taking down planes and children starving because of corruption?

Of course they are. But friends, the Lamb isn't sitting by doing nothing. He is bringing His kingdom about, but it is being resisted. And as long as His way is being ignored and resisted the four horsemen will continue to pound the surface of the globe.

Jesus could step in and stop it, but He doesn't because He is ruling as the Lamb, not the Lion. Jesus is constantly crying out "My way – the way of sacrificial love – is the way to abundant life. But humanity responds "we won't do it." So Jesus says "have it your way."

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Then we get the fifth seal – verse 9. Under the alter are the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God. And they call out "How long until you judge the inhabitants of the earth?" The church isn't spared from the earth's suffering is it?

The Lamb replies: "wait a little longer until the full number of martyrs is reached." God's got a number in His head that He is waiting for.

Now that's not very comforting is it? Like when are we going to hit that?

Gordon Conwell Seminary recently published a paper stating that roughly 70 million people have died for their faith in Jesus over the last 2000 years. And roughly 2 million of those lost their lives between 2001 and 2020.³ That's a big number, but Revelation doesn't say how much bigger it's going to get. It just says God's got a number. So the curtain is pulled back, suffering is explained, but the mystery remains.

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There is a silver lining here however: suffering has a finite value. It's like every piece of suffering has a number, and God has determined that when the glass is full He's going to pour out His justice.

And we actually get this picture throughout the New Testament. So for example Paul embraces suffering in order to bring Christ's kingdom that much closer. He says:

³ <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/blog/christian-martyrdom-who-why-how/> (Accessed January 18, 2020)

Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of His body, which is the church. (Colossians 1:24)

Paul isn't saying that Christ's sacrifice wasn't enough. He believes that by choosing to suffer he is reducing the amount others will need to suffer. The more he suffers the less remains for the rest of the church. God has a limit, like a bowl, for suffering. And when it is full then suffering will be over.

So here's the good news: Suffering for Christ is never in vain. Evil is on a chain. God is keeping track. And the end of suffering is coming.

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Then we get the sixth seal – verse 12 – and here John talks about earthquakes, a blackening sun, and the moon becoming *like* blood. Notice the word "like" here. John is reaching for language to describe the disaster of creation groaning under God's judgment. But the interesting thing is where this judgment comes from.

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In apocalyptic movies usually disaster comes from outside – an asteroid hits or a giant beast comes out of the ocean. But here the cosmos is crumbling from the inside out as God takes His sustaining hands off.

The Lamb is saying "If you want to be god in your own life, then go ahead, but you aren't going to do as good a job as Me." When we refuse to live our lives God's way God lets us go, and the result is the opposite of abundant life. Have you ever watched somebody walk through the opposite of abundant life? It's like how in Romans 1 God hands the wicked over to their own ways and allows them to bring judgment on themselves.

And this seal ends with the wicked kings of the earth hiding in caves and begging rocks to fall on them as they ask "Who can stand?"

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Next week we are going to look at who is able to stand under this judgment – spoiler alert, it's those who have the seal of the living God. But until then the sixth seal brings us to the edge of life as we know it.

And this is where we approach the 7th seal in chapter 8. And silence occurs as the prayers of the saints mix with the smoke of incense on God's alter and the final judgment begins.

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So what does a Jesus-follower do who has just read this chapter?

The main thing we do is trust God even though there is still mystery – this is Revelation's message. But in chapter 6 I think we get a practical way to do this. I believe the call is for us to pray the good prayers of this passage.

So there are actually six prayers in this section – 5 good ones and 1 bad one. The first four are spoken by the four living creatures as the horsemen are released. And they cry out “come” in verses 1 and 3 and 5 and 7. But I don’t think they are asking for the horses, I think they’re praying to the Lamb who is in control. “Come Lord, bring Your justice.”

And then at the fifth seal the saints call out “How long, O, Lord until we get justice?” And these prayers are good prayers even though they don’t get the answers they want. Instead we get the horsemen and God’s people get told to wait. But God hears these prayers. And in chapter 8 we see them mixing with incense and then, eventually being poured out.

Interestingly, as the sixth seal is broken the unbelieving world prays too. But even in their distress they refuse to pray to God. Instead they call to the rocks to fall on them and hide them from the Lamb. Isn’t it awesome that we don’t have to pray like that?

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So here’s the call: We live in a world where the powerful get what they want by stepping on the weak and vulnerable. Our world is full of this story. And Jesus-followers wonder “what do we do?”

And here we catch a glimpse of something incredibly powerful that is extended to us. God has left a way for us to participate in the mystery. We can join the four living creatures and the martyrs who pray for Jesus to release justice. And when we do this we can be assured that our prayers aren’t hitting the ceiling and bouncing down. In fact our prayers are being added to the Lamb’s who prayed “Father, let Your kingdom come, let Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

And God answered that prayer, and He is still answering it. Now ‘happy-happy-peace’ didn’t immediately result when Jesus prayed – He went to the cross. But salvation for humanity got bought there – Jesus filled that bowl and God dumped it out for our good and His glory.

And friends, our prayers are accomplishing the same purpose. God’s kingdom is breaking in, His justice is coming.

So give yourself to something that is going to impact history. Your donations to charity are great. Your volunteer hours are valuable. But our prayers together fill a basin in the throne room of the cosmos. And when it is full God will dump it out and justice will result.

So pray. Not to get answers, but to resonate with the conversation around the throne. Make your passion joining the four living creatures and the bride who pray “come.”