

Glory Time: The Seven Seals and the Soundtrack to the End of the World

Revelation 6 and 8:1-2

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It's the summer season, and once again those summer movies are beginning to come out. Once again they are loaded with violence and laced with deception, warfare, pestilence, death; movies aimed at my kids, movies like "Batman" and "The Mummy Returns." I think that as Christians it is important to protest immoral movies, but even better, wouldn't it be nice if we could come up with some good, wholesome, alternative screenplays?

So I thought of some:

"The Joy of Batman," which focuses on Bruce Wayne and how he sponsors the Gotham Art Museum in a wholesome exhibit of Thomas Kincaid pictures.

"Superman, the Green Thumb," all about the great things Clark Kent learned in the garden section of the Daily Planet.

"The Mummy, the Real Story," a documentary of Egyptian mummification techniques.

Yes, too much for little children, but much better than what we have now!

Last week I went and saw "The Mummy Returns," and it was full of deception, warfare, pestilence, death, and demons. **It was downright apocalyptic!** I don't know how else to say it. **It's high time Hollywood produces some wholesome movies, perhaps like wholesome Bible stories. Let's read our Bible story for the morning:**

Revelation 6 and 8:1-2:

Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say, as with a voice of thunder, "Come!" And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword ["Machiros"].

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I saw, and behold, a black horse, and its rider had a balance in his hand; and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat

for a denarius [day's wage], and three quarts of barley for a denarius [day's wage]; but do not harm oil and wine!"

When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him; and they were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?"

Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

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 rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid 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 before it?"

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

When they blow those trumpets — Wow! The Revelation makes “The Mummy Returns” look like “Thomas the Tank Engine and the Magic Railroad.” How do we make sense of such incredible violence?

The popular American notion among evangelical Christians is that this passage isn't about us. This is judgment on the bad people, because, you know, we are raptured out of there. Almost all the commentaries refer to the seals as judgment or wrath. The only problem with that idea is that Scripture doesn't say that.

In fact, when the fifth seal is opened, the martyrs cry out from under the altar, “How long, O Lord, before you will judge?” That seems to imply that the first four seals—the four horsemen—weren't judgment, or we have some stupid martyrs. It's finally at the sixth seal that they cry, “Hide us from the wrath of the Lamb.” **But that's only after the**

sky rolls up and the stars fall to earth. Only at the seventh trumpet of the seventh seal in chapter eleven do they sing, “Thy wrath has come.”

So what are we to make of the horsemen of the Apocalypse?

Deception, warfare, famine and death. In some other dimension, they may be some type of judgment. In some other dimension, they may be Satanic emissaries. But they are not portrayed that way here. In fact, they are called forth by the cherubim and the seraphim as Jesus breaks the seal.

Why on earth would He do such a thing?

Well, technically, because we asked Him to. John wept with all of creation. “Who is worthy to open the scroll?” We wanted to see what was inside. We wanted the meaning; the “Logos.”

But why are these horsemen necessary? And when is this going to happen?

Well, regarding the when, I hope you noticed in Revelation 4 and 5 that even though we began with creation at the start of Revelation 4, we ended up at the end of chapter 5 with all creatures in earth and in heaven worshipping the Lamb on the throne. Sounds like the end.

At the end of chapter 6, once again we’re at the end of the world. The sky rolls up, all the stars fall to earth, the mountains and hills are removed from their places . . . That’s big! We will come to the point of the end over and over again in The Revelation. So if we forget all of our silly, little, End Times charts for a moment, and just let The Revelation speak for itself, I think we’ll find that there are . . .

patterns on top of patterns,
times on top of times,
histories on top of histories,
sevens on top of sevens.

It’s one vision of reality, looking from one angle and then another; seeing from one dimension and then another dimension. Revelation is like a great symphony or anthem, which begins with seven little churches in Asia Minor. As the symphony progresses, new themes are added. Themes on top of themes. Meanings on top of meanings. Until it all crescendos at the end of all things, the new heaven and new earth, the new Jerusalem, people of God.

In fact, there is singing throughout the entire book. We’ve already read that the four living creatures around the throne *never stop singing* “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty.” That means that all the other songs right up to the end must build on that theme, in harmony with that theme, creating this great symphony. That’s also true of the events, not just the songs.

John sees this, John sees that, and it's all true. It's eternal stuff. He just can't say it all at once. This is not an excuse for taking The Revelation less literally; it's a reason for taking our modernistic, scientific mindset less literally, and taking The Revelation *more* literally. It's believing that our God is holy and eternal; was, is, and is to come; so wondrous that more than one thing can happen for Him at once.

Numbers, for instance, aren't just for counting. They reveal deep meanings and patterns. So seven is the number of creation. And seven is the number of God's manifold fullness. In seven days He created, and on the seventh day He rested. There are seven seals.

Four is often the number that refers to this world. Four seasons, four directions, the four winds . . . The first four seals are four horsemen, reminiscent of the four horsemen sent out in Zechariah to patrol the face of the earth. The first horseman is crowned and sitting on a white horse, which has caused some to speculate that this is Christ, meaning then that before all, He conquers. That's a beautiful and true meaning.

But because this horseman is grouped with the other three horsemen, I think this horseman probably is Deception, the spirit of the Anti-Christ, fake Christ, or false Christ. John told us it is already in the world (I John 4:3).

The next three horsemen are Warfare, Famine, and Death. They have power over a fourth of the earth. I think if it weren't for the fact that you are an American and live here or in Laodicea, you would probably say, "Oh, yeah. I know those guys. They rode into my village last year."

At the fifth seal John sees martyrs under the alter where the priests threw the blood of sacrifice. These people have been sacrificed to the glory of God like slain lambs. They cry out, "How long, O Lord?" Well, if they had one of those End Times charts they would know *exactly* how long. Maybe they don't know.

In the sixth seal they begin to get their answer. The sky rolls up, and the stars fall.

At the seventh seal, like a great concert having come to a crescendo, there is an awesome silence, and the seven angels are handed trumpets. Trumpets proclaim things. Seals hide mysteries. These seven seals, I believe, span all of history. These seven seals are *not* the content of the scroll. Anybody in that day would know that. **You can't read a scroll until you break all the seals!**

So breaking the seals, releasing the horsemen, and the suffering of history is just something necessary to understand the meaning of the scroll. That means that whatever is *in* this scroll is *worthy* of all the tribulation of history.

Whatever is in the scroll we must not see very clearly yet, because we sure do complain every time a horseman comes riding along. And we don't sing very loudly or very often with those angels and saints around the throne, "Holy, holy, holy" to the one who breaks the seal.

But how *can* we sing when we live in a world of deception, warfare, famine, and death? **Now we're back to my first point about our movies laced with warfare, famine, death, and pestilence!**

Last week during worship I was thinking about all of this. I remembered when I was a young man, sitting in a movie theatre. I was watching incredible violence on the movie screen. It really disturbed me; in fact, it scared me. There was a man on the screen with dark hair and dark eyes . . . looked like he was of a Mediterranean descent . . . just covered with blood, near naked.

An angry mob thirsty for violence cheered as he was beaten beyond recognition, as one from whom men hide their faces. And in his pain and agony, he cried out for his beloved. Just when I thought that he was dead for sure, I heard this: [Rocky theme song plays].

Just when I thought Rocky Balboa was dead for sure, I heard trumpets! I heard the theme song! And last week as we were worshipping, it hit me. The entire time that the seals are being opened and the horsemen are riding across the face of the earth, the theme song is playing. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty."

And the theme song changes things.

It tells you you are about to receive a revelation of glory, the glory of Rocky Balboa! That means that Apollo Creed, Drago the Russian, and Mr. T are all means by which we can see and know the glory of Rocky. The theme song tells you, Do not be fooled. It's glory time!

[Singing] "... growing strong now . . . won't be long now . . . gonna fly now." It's awesome!

Let me translate for you: "Holy, holy, holy is Rocky Balboa." **That is, Rocky Balboa is different from all the other fighters, because he loves Adrian his bride *so much* that when she shows up in the coliseum, nothing can stop him!** So Rocky will endure his cross, despising the shame, for the joy that is set before him. **"Adrian!"**

This is my point: Without Apollo Creed, we would never know the glory of Rocky Balboa. Without the Joker and Mr. Freeze, we would never know Batman, but only Bruce Wayne sitting in his mansion. Without Lex Luther we would never see the wonder of Superman. Without that evil mummy we'd never believe the courageous charm of Brendan Fraser.

And without the cross we'd never see Easter. Without those four horses we'd never know the content of the scroll. Without a great tribulation we'd never learn the new song. Our hearts know this. That's why we go to movies. We just don't have the stomach for it in real life.

So we become voyeurs of other people's sufferings in movies and in Scripture.

But voyeurs of suffering
can only be voyeurs of glory.

And Jesus the Rock wants to share
His glory with you.

Please see that breaking the seals reveals the glory of God. But all the while, the theme song is playing to give us courage. The theme song builds on this one line: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." Holy does not mean "pietistic" or "puritanical" or "prudish" or even "wholesome." Holy means "wholly other"; not like other gods; gloriously strange.

The horsemen are not holy. They are the ways of this world: power, pride, conquest, warfare, death, survival of the fittest. **We know those guys. We understand them.**

The horsemen ride the earth now. But when you hear the theme song, you know that the horsemen are a set-up for the glory of God. Time for glory. The light shines in the darkness. There is one thing you can see in the darkness better than you can see in the full light of day, and that one thing is the glory of a single flame. And that flame is Jesus.

The light shines in the darkness; Jesus *is* the glory.

Last time I preached that Jesus reveals the meaning of all history and our history. But now I'm saying, all history is ultimately about revealing Jesus, the bleeding heart of God. Jesus reveals the meaning of our suffering. But now the horsemen are part of our suffering, so it sounds like I'm saying God creates suffering so that He can then go and reveal what it means for us. But it's *more* than that. Jesus gives meaning to all my sufferings ("logoi"), but the deeper truth is that all my sufferings reveal Jesus ("Logos"), glory of God, the bleeding heart of God.

We are only beginning to glimpse the glory now, says Paul. Our darkened eyes cannot yet handle the full brilliance of Christ. Yet we see something here in the dark that we will sing about forever and ever.

How glorious is the light in the midst of darkness!

What is so strange and holy about this light? **Look how the Lion of the tribe of Judah has conquered!** Behold a slain little lamb. The Lion is the Lamb. He opens the scroll. It's Jesus who conquers all.

And when does He conquer? When He was slain. That's weird. That's holy. But He told us, "Now is the judgment of this world. Now is the ruler of this world cast out; and

I, when I am lifted up exalted, will draw all men to myself” (John 12). And He was speaking of His death.

The Lion conquers by choosing to be slain in love. The Lion is the Lamb.

We think that sometimes He’s the Lion and sometimes He’s the Lamb. But it’s not like He says, “I’ll try that Lion thing for a while, and if that doesn’t work I’ll do the Lamb thing. If the Lamb thing doesn’t work I’ll try the Lion thing.” **No! The Lion is the Lamb.**

Did you notice in the sixth seal that the kings of the earth and the peoples of the earth hide themselves in the mountains and caves crying out, “Hide us from the wrath of the little lamb”? **That’s weird!** But the light of love judges the darkness like fire. I think they look up and say, “Oh God, I slew that little lamb a million times.”

When He was slain, the world was judged;
When He was slain, Satan was cast out;
When He was slain, He draws all men to Himself;
When He was slain, He revealed the heart of God . . .

. . . exalted, glorified, lifted up, crucified, all at once.

How strange! How holy!

The scroll is a revelation of Him. The title is, The Revelation of Jesus. When we get to the end of chapter 11, when the seventh trumpet is blown out of the seventh seal, when the scroll is entirely opened, suddenly we will find ourselves reading the Christmas Story. It’s Jesus. He is so wholly strange, so different, that even though He is Lord God Almighty, He empties Himself of all worldly power and becomes a baby by dying in love, nailed to a cross.

My point is, we would never see His glory unless someone nailed Him to that cross.

Violence,
Pride,
Warfare,
Horsemen.

It’s in the midst of the powers of this world that love is most gloriously displayed. He is not like other fighters. He is not like Rocky Balboa. **He is not like the other gods of this world. He conquers by dying in love.** It’s called grace.

So I believe the point of the horsemen of lies, wars, famines, and death is revealing Jesus, heart of God.

There are many meanings to our sufferings . . .

That we sinned, and that's true;
That we are paying the price of our free choice in the Garden, and that's true;
That sufferings shape us and discipline us, and that's true.

You see, there are many theodicies (that's what theologians call them)—explanations for suffering, and they can all be true at once. Only Jesus is worthy to unwrap your particular theodicy, the particular meanings of your particular sufferings. But if there is one particular theodicy or explanation or theme in Scripture that runs the deepest, the broadest, and the most consistently, I think it is this: Our world suffers because God wants to show us something. He wants to show *us*, (not angels)—His bride, His children—His greatest glory.

It's absolutely true that we took the fruit of the tree in the Garden, and we died, blinded to the glory of God. But it was God who kicked us out of the Garden and **cursed the earth**. **You can read it if you doubt me. It was *Him*. *He* was the one who subjected the world to futility in hope**, writes Paul. He loosed the horsemen for a reason: to wake us up to glory.

Even before the Garden, He knew the plan. ***He* was the one who put that tree right smack dab in the middle of the Garden. It was *Him*! *He* *knew* we'd eat that fruit**. And He knew that one day He would be nailed to that tree.

“God consigned all men to disobedience that He might have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments; how inscrutable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been His counselor? Who has given a gift to Him that it might be repaid? For from Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever and ever, Amen” (Romans 12).

“His plan for the fullness of time was to unite all things in Christ. And He made us alive when we were dead in our sins that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 1).

The horsemen ride so we might know the glory of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus our Lord; not just *see* it, but *know* it and *live* it. Eugene Boring writes in his commentary: “‘Conquering’ in both cases, that of the Christ and that of Christians, means no more or less than dying.”

Picking up your cross.

Those under the altar are witnesses (in Greek, “Marturos,” martyrs); witnesses because they are slain like Christ by the “Machiros,” the sword of the horseman (also used in the temple sacrifice). The saints—the “holy ones”—die in love, like Jesus. Without the horsemen there would be no “Marturos.”

We Americans tend to forget about “Marturos”—witness—and pretty much focus all our energy on passing legislation against the horsemen. We fight power with power.

I was reading one of my favorite authors this week. He wrote this: “Being Good Samaritans is not enough. We must figure out how to put up better lighting systems on the road to Jericho, and perhaps have it patrolled by police, and put an end to people being mugged on that dangerous highway.”

I agree with his sentiment, but he entirely misses the point. It’s very clear in Scripture that the Good Samaritan is Jesus, and He *is* enough, and He *is* the point, and He wants us to see Him.

It’s when we’re beaten, on the side of the road, that He comes to us and we see Him. For He anoints us with oil and wine (Luke 10:34). We see His glory.

The point is not stopping all suffering,
The point is seeing Jesus in suffering;
The point is not outlawing crosses,
It’s picking them up. That’s what He wants.

It’s fascinating that the third horseman is commanded, “Do not harm oil and wine.” In the midst of the suffering, there must be oil and wine. The only other place the phrase “oil and wine” occurs in all the New Testament is in Luke 10, in the hands of the Good Samaritan. It’s in the suffering He anoints us with oil—His Spirit; He cleanses us with wine—His blood. We are called to dispense *His* oil and *His* wine in the midst of a dark and suffering world.

I could very easily be misunderstood here, but I’m just saying this: We Americans work so hard to eliminate *all* crosses, while Jesus just says, “Pick them up and follow.” Our brothers and sisters in other countries really don’t have much of a choice on this one. And I imagine that’s why it’s in places where the horsemen seem to be riding that the Gospel seems to be conquering. Places like China, Russia, Africa . . . lots of crosses there.

I have seen places where the horsemen are riding. People will literally riot to get their hands on Scripture. In Mozambique we couldn’t pass out tracts until we were ready to shut the van door and drive away, because we’d be mobbed.

Mother Teresa’s goal was not to stop suffering; her goal was to commune with Christ and know Christ in His sufferings. In doing that, she stopped immense suffering. She also conquered more hearts with the Gospel of love than anyone else in all the 20th century.

But no Calcutta, and no Teresa.
No cross, and no Easter.

Many of you are kind of mad. But I want to remind you: The Lamb who opens the seals is also slain by the horsemen. He is slain first. And many are sad because I'm somehow saying that the horsemen are necessary, because I'm saying that in this world you *will* have tribulation. It's necessary. And it can't be stopped by us.

We must fight the horsemen, but it's just an American illusion that they can be stopped by us. Although we medicate ourselves, cocoon ourselves, hide sick people in hospitals, and dress dead people in morgues, although we try to deny it, I believe that in some form the horsemen will some day ride into your town. And what will this mean then?

I think the horsemen were already riding among the seven churches of Asia Minor. So what did this revelation mean to them, when death rode into town? When their loved ones were being butchered in the coliseum before a screaming mob and torn apart by wild beasts? When they were excluded from buying or selling, and they faced starvation and famine? What did it mean to them?

And what does it mean to you, believer, when your body is racked with cancer, and death rides into your home? What does it mean to you? It means this: It's time for glory. It's time to worship. It's time to listen for the theme song. It's time to conquer. For it's the Lamb, your Lord, who was slain, who unwraps the scroll and breaks the seals. It means this: Glory time.

Or have you forgotten just who your Lord is?

In your imagination, picture a man with dark hair and dark eyes, of Mediterranean descent. Not the one I was talking about before. This man too is covered in blood, and He is near naked. And He has been beaten beyond recognition as the crowd cheers, thirsty for violence. He is as one from whom men hide their faces.

In His pain and agony He cries out for His beloved Jerusalem, **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."** He's dying. Do you see Him? Look at Him. He *is* the Lord God Almighty. And He's going to Hell for you, His bride. Look at Him. And listen for the theme song.

[Singing— "Holy, Holy, Holy]

[Benediction:]

Did you see it? Were you looking at Him hanging there? Cherubim and seraphim; all the saints adore Him. If you were, I think you have begun to see His glory. "Though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see." But He washes you in His blood and shows you His glory, shining in the midst of the darkness.

“For it is God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (II Corinthians 4:6). The battered, beaten face of Christ.

While we were worshipping at the last hour I kept seeing a picture. It was of a wall in Tijuana, Mexico; it could have been one of several. (We used to go there and build houses in the slums.)

In those shops in Tijuana there are, high on the wall, black, velvet pictures. Invariably, there are at least these four: a picture of Elvis; a picture of two naked people having sex—pornography; a picture of a naked baby doing rude things; and then a picture of the face of Christ, blood streaming down His cheeks, and tears in His eyes. He’s looking out on the shop.

For twenty years I have laughed about that at parties and said things to people like, “One of these pictures doesn’t belong, because it’s holy.” This morning I believe the Gospel and realize it’s holy because it’s *there*, the light shining in the darkness, the new covenant, the new song, the glory of God Almighty, the bleeding heart of our Lord.

In the name of Jesus, keep singing the theme song. Amen.