

**OPENING THE SCROLL:
THE CENTRAL MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION
Rev 6:1-11:19 (14 April 2002)
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In Michael Crichton's 1987 book *Sphere*—which, in 1998, became a movie—a group of four scientists are summoned to an underwater crash site, except that this crash is not quite what they expected. Onboard is an alien artifact, a perfect sphere, which gives mind powers to those who enter it. But humans are not ready for such powers, and so the subconscious mind of each empowered character creates life-threatening situations. Three scientists manage to survive and, in the end, they wish away the power and the knowledge of the power. In this story, the fears of the mind become ferocious monsters. The scary monsters of the mind become real monsters, monsters that threaten the lives of those who have imagined them into existence.

The doomsday drama of the Book of Revelation plays a similar mind game with all those who enter its world, for the Apostle John has taken the dark demons of the mind and has breathed into them life. The monsters of Revelation are scary, and they are scary because we were already afraid of them before they became so real.

^{Rev 6:1}I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, “Come!” ²I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

³When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” ⁴Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

⁵When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. ⁶Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, “A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!”

⁷When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” ⁸I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. 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 (NIV).

The Four Horsemen—one of the most recognized symbols of the Apocalypse. Seven Seals, Seven Trumpets, Seven Plagues—images of war, bloodshed, famine, death, earthquakes, a scorched earth, bloody and bitter waters, a vanishing sky, a dark sun, a bloody moon, falling stars, demonic locusts, and the angel of the Abyss. Where *did* John find all of these monsters?

First, he turned to the world of the Old Testament—the plagues against Egypt that accompanied the Exodus, the fall of Jericho to the army of Joshua, the army of locusts depicted in the prophecy of Joel, and the manifestation of Yahweh at Mount Sinai. Then, he turned to the world of his own time—the fear of invasion by the Parthian cavalry, the earthquakes that frequently shook the cities of Asia Minor, and very possibly the eruption of Vesuvius which had recently terrified the Mediterranean world. John took some of his contemporaries’ worst experiences and worst fears of wars and natural disasters, blew them up to apocalyptic proportions, and clothed them in biblical imagery. His point is *not* to predict a sequence of events. His point is to explore the meaning of the impending divine judgment that is coming against the sinful world. *John’s prophecy is a powerful and profound exploration and explanation of the meaning of the judgment he pronounces; but if we try to read it as a prediction of how that judgment will occur, we turn the prophecy into a confused muddle and we miss its real point.*

In chapter 5 and verse 1, John says, “Then I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.” What is the message of the scroll? John wanted to know, and so do we. Let’s begin at the beginning, and allow John himself to reveal to us the secret of the scroll.

The Apocalypse opens in 1:1-3 by informing us that God gave the revelation to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ then gave it to His angel. His angel then gave it to John. John wrote it down. Notice the chain of communication: God to Jesus Christ to the angel to John to the church. In 5:1, God (“the One seated on the throne”) holds in His right hand a scroll. Then in 5:7, Jesus Christ (the slaughtered “Lamb”) takes the scroll from the right hand of God. Earlier in 5:2, “a mighty angel” had raised the question, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” The answer: Jesus Christ is worthy. Then in 10:1-2, “another mighty angel” holds in his hand a “little scroll.” In 10:8, John is told to take “the scroll.” Note that the terms “little scroll” and “the scroll” are used interchangeably. *The “little scroll” of chapter 10 is the same scroll that we first saw in chapter 5.* Observe, once again, the chain of communication. God gave the scroll to Jesus Christ, who opened it and gave it to His angel, who gave it to John, who wrote down what the scroll said. The scroll of chapter 5 was sealed. Now, in chapter 10, the scroll lies *open* in the angel’s hand. John takes the open scroll from the angel and eats it—verses 9-10. Eating the scroll is a symbolic action based on the prophet Ezekiel’s similar experience (Ezek 2:8-3:3), and by this action John signifies his acceptance of the commission to “prophesy again”—verse 11. So, in 11:1-13, John reveals the content of the scroll. This is followed by the seventh trumpet that announces the end—11:15.

Ok, let’s stop a moment and remember to breathe! . . . I know that I have been methodical and meticulous. And here is why: *John himself provides the key to unlock the meaning of his message.* The mysterious scroll in the right hand of God is opened by Jesus Christ, and John—by means of a mighty angel—is shown the scroll’s contents in chapter 10. Then, John shares the message of the scroll and the end comes:

^{11:15}The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever.”

“Wait a minute!” some of you are thinking. “How can this be ‘the end’? The bulk of the book is still before us.” Please be patient, and I will return to this point.

We are now ready for a very important conclusion. Here it is: *the events that occur at the opening of the seals are not the contents of the scroll*. This is a crucial key to understanding the Book of Revelation; yet, it is a key seldom understood. The opening of the seals one by one is a literary device enabling John to narrate a series of visions that *prepare for* the revelation of the contents of the scroll. But neither the series of seven judgments that accompany the seal-openings, nor the series of seven trumpet-blasts is the content of the scroll. *It is not until chapter 10 that the main content of the prophetic revelation John communicates in his book is given to him*. All that has preceded is preparatory. The stage has been set, and now the secret of the scroll is disclosed in chapter 11.

The content of the scroll is revealed in the succinct summary of 11:1-13. Then, the seventh trumpet is sounded and the universe resounds with the recognition of God's victory. Some of you may object, "Woe, woe, woe [please pardon the apocalyptic pun] . . . slow down for a minute! I want to know more about this victory. Yes, I realize that God wins. But how did He do it? What was the battle like? And how does this affect me?" These are good questions, and John appears to anticipate them. So, in chapters 12-15, the church's victorious conflict with the powers of evil is given a much more extended treatment, which is then followed by a fuller picture of the final judgment and the end—chapters 15-22. (Chapters 15 and 16 are included in *both* of these sections because the church's conflict is integrated into the final judgment and end.)

We need to return to the scroll and ask again, what is its message? *The scroll reveals the way in which the Lamb's victory is to become effective in establishing God's rule over the world*. The mystery of God's will is now made known. Only the Lamb can open the scroll and reveal its message, because it is His victory that makes possible the implementation of God's plan contained in the scroll. *More specifically, the scroll will reveal how the followers of Christ are to participate in the coming of God's kingdom by following Christ in witness, sacrifice, and victory*. Because the Lamb has conquered, He is the one who can reveal how His followers are also to conquer.

Let's read John's summary of the scroll.

^{11:1}I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there. ²But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months. ³And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth." ⁴These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. ⁵If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. ⁶These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.

⁷Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. ⁸Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. ⁹For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. ¹⁰The

inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth.

¹¹But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. ¹²Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here.” And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on.

¹³At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven (NIV).

The content of the scroll is not that faithful Christians are to suffer martyrdom or that their martyrdom will be their victory. These things have already been made quite clear (see 6:9-11; 7:9-14). *The new revelation is that the Christians’ faithful witness and death is to be instrumental in the conversion of the nations of the world.* Their victory is not simply their own salvation from a world doomed to judgment, but is also the salvation of the nations. God’s kingdom is to come not simply by saving His own people and extinguishing the rebels. It is to come as the sacrificial witness of His servant people brings the rebellious world to acknowledge that God is King. The people of God have been redeemed *from all the nations* (5:9) in order to bear prophetic witness *to all the nations* (11:3-13).

The two witnesses symbolize the church in its role of witnessing to the world. This is shown by the identification of them as lampstands (11:4), the symbol of the churches in chapter 1, where the seven churches are represented as seven lampstands (1:12, 20). The witnesses are also prophets (11:3, 10), modeled especially on the Old Testament figures of Moses and Elijah. Like Jesus, the witnesses suffer death and then experience a resurrection and ascension (11:8-12).

Judgments, which have played a prominent role in Revelation so far, in and of themselves do not communicate God’s gracious willingness to forgive those who repent. This is the work of the witnesses. Notice that they are dressed in sackcloth (11:3), the symbol of repentance (cf. Jonah 3:4-10; Matt 11:21; Luke 10:13). Whatever else verse 13 means, it certainly means that all the survivors genuinely repent and acknowledge the one true God. In the judgments announced by Old Testament prophets, a tenth (Isa 6:13; Amos 5:3) or seven thousand people (1 Kings 19:18) are the faithful remnant who are spared when the judgment wipes out the majority. But John reverses this. Only a tenth—or seven thousand—suffer the judgment, while the majority—nine-tenths—are spared so that they may come to repentance and faith. Thanks to the witness of the witnesses, the judgment actually saves.

It is a fact of history that in the early centuries of the church, Christian martyrdom impressed and won people to faith in Jesus Christ. The martyrs were effective witnesses to the truth of the Gospel because their faith in Christ’s victory over death was so convincingly obvious in the way they faced death and died.

What does all of this mean for you and for me? It means that we must follow Christ in witness, sacrifice, and victory. *Christianity is not only the right way to live; it is also the right way to die.* In life and in death, the church is to bear witness to the victorious Lamb of God. And this witness is God’s way of bringing salvation to the unbelieving world. *Being a Christian is not simply about how to live; it is also about how to die.* At stake is not only our salvation, but also the salvation of others. *When we as the church*

live, suffer, and die for Christ, we become a lampstand shining forth the salvation of God in a dark world. Now that we know what the scroll says, what are we going to do about it?

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