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Unveiling Hope – Revelation 6-8

With a last name like McIlwraith and my mom's maiden name Robertson, my ancestral heritage links back to both England and Scotland. So, as long as I can remember my family has been some level intrigue with the comings and goings of the British Royal Family.

As a young boy, I remember both my father and grandfather slipping away from some of the family festivities to watch the Queen's annual Christmas address. So even though I was travelling last week, I was compelled to try and catch at least some of her funeral service on TV.

I, like probably 90% of you, have never known in my lifetime another leader of the Commonwealth except Queen Elizabeth. She had ruled for 70 years until her death on September 8. As I was watching the somber pomp and pageantry, I realized that no matter how much you support or even care about the British monarchy, things are going to change for us in the coming days under King Charles III.

With her death, it doesn't just mean the end of Queen Elizabeth II's reign. It also means the changeover of many items both in Britain and abroad that bear her warranty. Now a royal warrant is a **seal** or stamp of approval from the Queen that signifies she endorses that item. The most obvious are anything that bears her image.

Have you ever considered that all the coins that we use every day have a picture of the Queen? Our nickels, dimes, quarters, loonies, and toonies all bear her image.

She is right there on all of them and she is also on our \$20 bills. That will change, not overnight but eventually that will change. Soon, we will have to adapt to seeing Charles staring up at us every time we slap down some loose change to pay for our medium double-double at Tim Hortons.

If you are still so inclined to write a letter and drop it in a mailbox, there is a good chance that the stamp you affix to that letter has a picture of the Queen on it. In fact, since 1939 the image of Queen Elizabeth II has appeared on 59 different stamps issued in Canada. That too, will eventually change to Charles.

You may have also noticed that the traditional anthem of *God Save the Queen* has now been changed back to *God save the King* for Charles but there may be some other subtler changes on the horizon that are less well known. The **seal** of approval from the Queen is not just represented by her image on money, postage stamps or a mention in an anthem. It also extends to products. Did you know that there are many brands specifically in the UK that have earned the right to bear the Royal Coat of Arms on their packaging signifying that they have the seal of approval of the Queen? She may actually even use the product. These goods usually include the words, *By Appointment to Her Majesty the Queen*, somewhere on the packaging. They include Twinings Tea, Heinz Ketchup, Bacardi Liquor, Cadbury Chocolate, Coca-Cola and Kellogg's cereal.

But upon the Queen's death over 800 brands lost their right to use her royal seal on their packaging and now have to prove that the new King and the royal family endorses their product before they can get it back. This Royal Seal is a big deal not just to our money and our postage but to many other products and for the first time in over 70 years, we are going to see it all change in the coming years under the new monarchy. Interesting.

Today, we are in the fourth week of an eight-week message series at North Park Fanshawe that we have entitled *Unveiling Hope. A Study on the Book of Revelation*. Today, our focus is on *seals* like the royal seals not aquatic seals. Seven Seals.

As we said when we introduced this series and it bears repeating every week, there has been a hesitancy for preachers to dive into Revelation

because throughout the years, it has been one of the most misunderstood books of the Bible. Most likely it is because its genre of writing is apocalyptic literature. In our culture, we have come to understand the word *apocalypse* as doom and gloom and end of the world destruction. In fact, I heard the word used in describing the devastation as Hurricane Ian hit Florida this week. To the people of Jesus's day however, apocalypse would have had a more positive connotation.

To them it meant, *unveiling, to open up or break through.*

Three distinct characteristics of apocalyptic literature that I hope you are seeing throughout the book of Revelation are:

1. It desires to paint a picture of what the future could be.
2. It demonstrates that there is more to the here and now than meets the eye. *Things aren't always as they seem.*
3. It relies a great deal on imagery, pictures and numbers that aren't intended to be taken literally.

As we understand this, we begin to see that rather than a book of destruction and doom and gloom, Revelation is a book about discipleship. It is about growing our faith and revealing Jesus and it is one of the most hope-filled books in all the Bible.

In Revelation 1, we see that some 60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, John, Jesus' beloved disciple finds himself in exile on the prison island of Patmos. He was arrested and sent there by the Romans because of his Christian faith. While he was worshiping the Lord one day, John receives a revelation, an apocalypse. It is like the Lord pulls back a curtain and gives John a powerful image of who Jesus is and reminds John that Jesus is with him.

In the vision, Jesus is standing amongst the seven lampstands. Lampstands were a symbol for the church in John's vision. Jesus standing amongst the lampstands meant that He was with the church and Christians no matter what they are going through. They don't have to fear the present or the future because He is with them.

It is while He is standing in the midst of the lampstands that Jesus dictates a message through John to His seven churches and to Christians everywhere. The messages contain words of encouragement, challenge and exhortation.

Last week, Trish looked at Revelation 4, 5. In his vision, John received a powerful image of a door open into Heaven and there is a throne with someone sitting on it. Who is on the throne? It is the Creator of the universe. In the right hand of the One seated on the throne is a scroll and it is secured by seven seals. Why is the scroll so important? It's because it contains the history of the world. Written on that scroll is your history and my history. It contains the history of our children and their children. It contains God's design for creation and bringing to fruition His grand redemptive plan for humanity as His Kingdom comes on earth as it is in Heaven.

In his vision, John discovers that there is only one person in the whole universe who is able to open the scroll and set things in motion. It's Jesus. He is the only person who can break the seals and open the scroll. Why? Why only Jesus? It's because He is the lamb. He is the One who has taken on the sin of all humanity and suffered its consequences. He isn't worthy to open the scroll because He created the world. He isn't worthy because He rose from the dead. No. He is worthy because He was slain for our sin. For you and for me. The Lamb is on the throne. Not just in John's vision 2000 years ago, but He is right there on the throne today. Do you believe that? That's so important. If you have your Bibles, I want to invite you to turn to Revelation 6 as we look at little closer at the significance of Jesus opening the seven seals on the scroll.

As Darrell Johnson states in his book, *Discipleship on the Edge, the breaking of the seven seals in this section of Revelation, best explains what is going on in our world today.*

Remember in this book of the Bible, Jesus is pulling back the curtain to give us a glimpse of the dynamics of history that may normally be hidden from us and we have to read Revelation 6 in light of all that we have discovered prior to this.

The lamb, Jesus is on the throne and He is the only one who can break the seals and open the scroll and set things in motion.

There are seven seals on the scroll. Do you remember what the number seven represents in the book of Revelation? Completeness. Do you remember what seals are? They may be used to contain the document but more importantly, seals designate ownership or endorsement just as the Queen Elizabeth's seal we discussed earlier. Back in the first century, during the time that John had this vision in Revelation, documents were sealed. Not necessarily to conceal their contents but to signify that only the one who is authorized by the author of the document, could open it.

God is the Author of this scroll containing all of history and His plan for humanity, His good news and only Jesus, because He was slain can open it.

In Revelation 6&7, Jesus breaks the seals one at a time.

Let's look at the breaking of the first seal.

Revelation 6:1

As I watched, the Lamb broke the first of the seven seals on the scroll. Then I heard one of the four living beings say with a voice like thunder, "Come!"

Jesus breaks the first seal and the four living beings, remember last week, Trish described their significance. Four is the number of creation, the cosmos, so these four living beings represent all of God's living, breathing animate creation. From around the throne they are roaring, *Come!* Can you imagine this scene? All of creation petitioning, *Come!* Who are they calling so emphatically? Is it John! He's already there. No, they are calling upon Jesus, the lamb that was slain. They are imploring Jesus to come and establish His Kingdom on earth just as it is in Heaven. They are bringing to mind the prayer Jesus taught us, *your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.*

In the breaking of each of the first four seals, God's creation cries out to Jesus, *Come. Your Kingdom come, Lord.* Isn't that powerful? We just sang it and now we have a deeper grasp of what it means. But do we truly understand the ramifications of calling on Jesus to come and establish His Kingdom here? As the Kingdom of God breaks through in the world and in our lives, it changes things. Sometimes it

changes everything but for some of us, we are not too keen on change.

Blockbuster Video, are you familiar with this company? At its peak in 2004, Blockbuster employed almost 85 000 people and had over 9 000 stores worldwide. Interestingly, in the year 2000 a small digital video streaming service contacted Blockbuster with an offer to sell their company to them for \$50 million. Blockbuster's CEO at the time wasn't interested in the offer because he thought digital streaming was just a very small niche business that would soon die. He was resistant to change. Why tamper with a good thing? Ironically, less than ten years later, Blockbuster declared bankruptcy because it was unable to transition to a digital model as technology changed. That company that who was willing to sell Blockbuster? They are still in existence and now have over 100 million subscribers and have an annual revenue of almost \$9 billion. You may have heard of this company. It's called Netflix.

Change. Some are resistant to it. To call on the Kingdom of God to come, do you understand, it changes everything. It upsets the status quo. It reveals the sin and idols in our lives. It flushes out evil and when the Kingdom of God comes, it clashes with the Kingdom of this Earth. It is met with some resistance and sometimes, we, as Christians get caught in the crunch. Many of you know what I mean. *Come Lord Jesus Come* is a bold proclamation. Look how the text continues as the lamb breaks the first seal.

Revelation 6:2

I looked up and saw a white horse standing there. Its rider carried a bow, and a crown was placed on his head. He rode out to win many battles and gain the victory.

Imagery. Remember apocalyptic literature. What does a white horse represent? Animals are important in Revelation. In this day, oxen were used for working the fields, donkeys were used for transportation but horses, does anyone know what horses were used for? They were used for battle, for war! There has been some dispute over the years of what or who the rider of this white horse in the breaking of the first seal represents. Early biblical experts suggested it was Christ.

I mean he is riding a white horse but more recent scholarship leans more towards the idea that the rider of the white horse is the power of evil that seeks to imitate Jesus and deceive the world.

2 Corinthians 11:14

Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.

But evil is not in charge and can only operate with the authority of the One who is on the throne. As we will see as the seals continue to be opened, this evil somehow serves God's plan for His Kingdom to come. I know that may be hard to understand but remember, *Things aren't always as they seem*. The breaking of the second seal.

Revelation 6:3-4

When the Lamb broke the second seal, I heard the second living being say, "Come!" Then another horse appeared, a red one. Its rider was given a mighty sword and the authority to take peace from the earth. And there was war and slaughter everywhere.

The breaking of the second seal reveals a red horse. Red symbolizing blood and the fact that when evil pushes up against God's Kingdom, it usually always reverts to violence or even war. We read it in the paper every day. There are currently over 25 live conflicts happening around the world right now. The Russian invasion of the Ukraine. The war in Afghanistan. Political instability in Lebanon. The war in Yemen. The crisis in Myanmar. The conflict in Ethiopia. Over two billion people live in conflict affected areas around the globe, many have been displaced from their homeland, forced to flee as refugees.

I opened the London Free Press on Wednesday of this past week and was a little concerned to see how violence seems to be encroaching on our community more and more. Headlines such as *Man badly hurt in London stabbing. Man stabbed, robbed at ATM. 19-year-old charged in murder*, seem to be more regular occurrences. Do you understand that conflicts, whether they are between countries or individuals, always have spiritual nuances? War is hell. Two Kingdoms colliding. One or both of the combatants have chosen to ignore the way of the Lamb. The breaking of the third seal.

Revelation 6:5-6

When the Lamb broke the third seal, I heard the third living being say, "Come!" I looked up and saw a black horse, and its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand.

"A loaf of wheat bread or three loaves of barley will cost a day's pay. And don't waste the olive oil and wine."

The pair of scales in the rider's hand represent the fact that when war and evil are present so is greed and famine. The voice crying out is warning that soon just the bare necessities needed to exist like bread and water, will cost a whole day's wage but the rich will still have their luxuries like oil and wine.

For the past six years the country of Yemen has been locked in a bloody civil war. The reason? For the most part it has to do with oil. Nearly a quarter million people have been killed, but many more have been pushed to the brink of starvation and maybe not surprisingly, it has been the children who have suffered the most. In one case, UN officials came across a four-year-old boy who had literally gnawed his own fingers to the bone because he was so hungry. According to a UN report in August 2021, one child was dying every ten minutes in Yemen.

As Eugene Peterson states in his book, **Reversed Thunder**, *Famine is the condition in which we have most of what we don't need and almost nothing of what we do need.*

The breaking of the third seal that reveals the black horse represents the evil that is greed and injustice which leads to hunger and famine. The breaking of the fourth seal.

Revelation 6:7-8

When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the fourth living being say, "Come!" I looked up and saw a horse whose color was pale green. Its rider was named Death, and his companion was the Grave. These two were given authority over one-fourth of the earth, to kill with the

sword and famine and disease and wild animals.

This time, with the breaking of the fourth seal, the rider of the fourth horse has a name. No other rider has a name except this one and the name is not a particularly attractive one, it's *Death*. It makes sense though; he is riding a sickly coloured horse.

My youngest daughter is pregnant. She is due in February. We are not sure whether it is a boy or girl. There will be no gender reveals so it will be a surprise to everyone when the little one makes its appearance. So that has made it even more fun to guess potential names but I can tell you that no one has proposed *Death* as an option. It does exist by the way, *Death* as a name. In fact, according to an article I read on names, *Death* is the 198 162nd most popular last name in the world. 1 in every 3 452 000 people have it. Most of them happen to live in Egypt.

But what a picture it paints here in the text. *Death* on a pale horse is riding throughout the countryside with his companion, did you get it, *Grave*. *Death* and *Grave* are revealed by the breaking of the fourth seal. With the breaking of the first four seals of the scroll, we see that ever since Jesus, the Lamb that was slain took His position on the throne, these *four horsemen of the Apocalypse* have been wreaking havoc on the world trying to bring Jesus and His followers down.

They represent evil, war, violence, greed and famine, death and the grave. You may wonder, *how can this be*, Jesus is on the throne! How can evil, violence, greed, famine, death, the grave and sin of any kind get a foothold in our world when our King is on the throne? It is because there is resistance. Jesus coming and bringing His Kingdom is good news to us, but He is being resisted. As long as the way of Jesus and His kingdom values are being ignored, shunned, ridiculed and resisted by our world, the four horsemen will continue to ride.

As long as evil is glorified, violence is marketed, sex is commodified, war is disguised as patriotism and famine is rationalized, the world will continue to suffer from them all. But of course, God does not desire any of them.

None of it was in His plan but each of them are a direct result of humanity, including you and me, resisting Jesus and the coming of His Kingdom here on earth as it is in Heaven. Do you see that? Do we understand that?

None of it is the way of Jesus. All of it is a violation of God's created order but creation does cry out, *Come. Come Lord Jesus come* and He is coming. Can you see Him? Can you hear Him? We see evidence of the Lord breaking through all around us. Every time evil is overcome, love prevails and grace is demonstrated, the Kingdom is breaking through.

When someone is healed, a sin is repented and a life is transformed, the Kingdom is breaking through but still... there's the sound of the hoof beats of the four horsemen in the background trampling the earth. For whatever reason, God allows their presence to still be with us. It doesn't mean He is not on the throne. It means He has given us all a choice. His way, the way of the Kingdom of God, the way of unselfish love and sacrifice or, the way of the world.

With the breaking of the first four seals, we see that to deny the way of Jesus means there will be greater conflict, violence, injustice, hunger, sickness and death and the church, we won't necessarily be spared of these things. Why? It is because as I said earlier, when two opposing Kingdoms are on a collision course, there will be collateral damage. We could get caught in the middle. Now to seal five in and notice there are no more horses.

Revelation 6:9

When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of all who had been martyred for the word of God and for being faithful in their testimony.

As this seal is broken, John sees under the altar. Why is that? Well, it was because it was under the altar in the temple of that day that the blood of those animals sacrificed on the altar, pooled. It collected there. This was John's way of saying that those who died as martyrs for their faith in Jesus, demonstrated the ultimate sacrificial act. And these martyrs, the text says they shouted to the Lord:

Revelation 6:10

“O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you judge the people who belong to this world and avenge our blood for what they have done to us?”

For some of us, that is our cry too isn't? When we see all that is going on in the world, we cry out, *How Long Lord?* The answer to that question given in the text may not be what we want to hear. The martyrs are told in essence that there may be more suffering yet to come. It is what happens when Kingdoms clash. The way John saw it in this vision, is the same way the Apostle Paul saw it in some of his writings. It is in the suffering that we may even have to endure, that the Kingdom of God is drawn closer. What do you think of that idea? It is in the suffering of the saints that the Kingdom of God advances?

Let me just say this as a bit of a caveat. **Tribulation.** Are you familiar with this word? It comes from the Greek word that means *crushing pressure*. It is like a seismic shift of an earthquake. There have been many more books, theses and debates about whether Christians will experience a time of tribulation, crushing pressure and suffering. The short answer is yes.

From the time Jesus came into the world, people who aligned with Him, followed Him and gave their lives to Him were persecuted for their faith. That is why John is on Patmos. That is what happens when the Kingdom of God breaks in and clashes with the Kingdom of Earth and is met with resistance. There will be tribulation, pressure and even suffering for those who declare to be Christians. Do you see that? But if you look at history, each time there was persecution of Christians, the gospel and the Kingdom of God advanced. There is so much more to say on this topic but I will leave it there for now. The breaking of the sixth seal.

Revelation 6:12-17

I watched as the Lamb broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake. The sun became as dark as black cloth, and the moon became as red as blood. Then the stars of the sky fell to the earth like green figs falling from a tree shaken by a strong wind.

The sky was rolled up like a scroll, and all of the mountains and islands were moved from their places.

Then everyone—the kings of the earth, the rulers, the generals, the wealthy, the powerful, and every slave and free person—all hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains.

And they cried to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb. For the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to survive?”

What are the images that are brought to mind as I read that section? Isn't it utter chaos? Earthquakes. Stars falling from the sky. The Sun goes dark. The moon goes red. Mountains are moved. Trees are uprooted. People are hiding and crying out. This is chaos. This is imagery for the whole earth is imploding. This is a cosmic meltdown and that is exactly what the earth's final crisis will look like. In fact, read the newspapers, watch the news and it kind of looks like what is happening today, doesn't it?

The two Kingdoms are clashing but when the earth continues to resist the way of the Lamb, our destruction will not come from the outside like some Hollywood movie that depicts a giant meteorite barreling towards us to obliterate us all. No. The earth's demise will not come from outside but from within. We are self-destructing, imploding. The Triune God is on the throne but He has given us a choice of whether we turn to Him or not. With the earth continuing to resist Him, it is like He says, *you want to be your own God. You want to do it your own way. Okay, go for it. I will take a step back and you can hold it all together* and as we have seen, we can't.

We can't hold it all together and everything is falling apart. We have messed with His plan for creation and the environment. We have messed with His plan for sexuality and identity. We have messed with His plan for work and rest. We have messed with His plan for peace and reconciliation.

We have messed with His plan for love and grace, servanthood and commitment and look where it has gotten us. It is all falling apart.

So, what do you expect with the opening of the seventh seal? The sixth seal has brought us right up to a bit of a climax, or as my Grade 12 English Teacher would say, a *denouement* moment. It can go one way or the other. Everything gets decided now. Revelation 6 comes to an end with this ominous final sentence. Did you catch it in verse 17?

Revelation 6:17

For the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to survive?"

Judgement is coming. **Who is able to survive?** Who is able to survive all that has been unleashed by the breaking of these six seals? Who can survive the evil and sin, the violence, greed, famine, death, suffering and destruction. Who can survive all of that? We get our answer before the breaking of the seventh seal.

Revelation 7:2-4

And I saw another angel coming up from the east, carrying the seal of the living God.

And he shouted to those four angels, who had been given power to harm land and sea, "Wait! Don't harm the land or the sea or the trees until we have placed the seal of God on the foreheads of his servants." And I heard how many were marked with the seal of God—144,000 were sealed from all the tribes of Israel:

Who is able to survive? The evil and sin, the violence, greed, famine, death, suffering and destruction? Who can survive the Tribulation and the clashing of the Kingdoms? It is the ones who are marked by the seal of the living God. Remember a seal demonstrates ownership and endorsement. Those who proclaim to be children of God through faith in Jesus Christ, that is who will survive all that comes our way until the Kingdom of God fully advances and engulfs the earth and makes everything right and new again.

In this text, John is telling the church and Christians everywhere, that they are going to make it through

all of this because they have been sealed by the One who is on the throne. Who are sealed? The 144 000 from the tribes of Israel. What does that mean?

Remember, apocalyptic literature. That is not a literal number. It is hugely symbolic. In the Hebrew, one of the original languages of the Bible, 144 000 is a way of saying, big, really big. The number of those sealed by God is so big you can't count them all and they will come from every tribe and nation. One day there will be a new Israel.

What does it mean to be sealed? It means that we are owned by Jesus. He has bought us for a price, His life for our sins, His life for our salvation and once we have received all that He has done for us, He says;

John 10:28

No one can snatch them away from me,

How are we sealed? While it is not a literal stamp or an image of Jesus pressed into our forehead like the Queen's picture on a coin but it is a similar connotation.

Revelation 14:1

Then I saw the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with him were 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.

Remember, in the Bible, *name* means character or personality. To have a name written on us means to have a character or personality entrenched in us. Therefore, to be sealed by God is to have His character and His essence embedded into our very being, heart, mind, soul and spirit. By saying it is on our foreheads (remember apocalyptic literature and imagery) simply means that God's character in us should be obvious for all to see. Everyone we encounter each day should be able to tell we are followers of Jesus by the way that His character and essence is embodied in us by the way that we live.

That is what it means to be sealed by God and those who are sealed by God will be the ones who will survive anything thrown our way. No one and nothing can take us away from Jesus. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit.

We have covered a lot and I hope this has been helpful to you and we haven't even gotten to the seventh seal. We will look at it more next week. Remember, a lot of our content is coming from Darrell Johnson's Book, *Discipleship on the Edge* and Eugene Peterson's Book, **Reversed Thunder**. Check them out to go deeper in these areas.

So as we conclude, can I ask you? Have you been sealed by God? The Kingdom of God is advancing and the Earth is resisting. We see evidence of that all around us but the King is on the throne. Jesus wins in the end. He is making all things new. Have you made the decision to surrender your life to Him? Have you exchanged your sin for the full and abundant life He has in mind for you? Have you accepted His seal on your life so that you can live in His plan for you and not the worlds? It is the best way of living ever. If you have never done that, you can do so today by simply coming before Him and surrendering all that you are and all that you have to Him. **Amen? Amen. Let's pray.**

Points to Ponder

Unveiling Hope – A Study of the Book of Revelation

Revelation 6-8 (Seven Seals)

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Share some perspectives you have on the Queen. What does her death represent to you? Where are some places you have seen her royal “warrant” or seal?
2. In our worship services, we have often sung the refrain, “Come, Lord Jesus, Come”. What is the significance of these words? What are we inviting Jesus to do with this petition? How does it impact our lives?
3. In what ways have you experienced Satan masquerading as “light”? Have you ever been tricked by his deceptions thinking something was good but, in the end, it turned out to be so wrong? Share some of your experiences.
4. In what ways have you been directly impacted by our world becoming increasingly violent? What do you think of the statement, “conflicts, whether between countries or individuals, always have spiritual nuances.”?
5. In his book, *Reversed Thunder*, Eugene Peterson states that “Famine is the condition in which we have most of what we don’t need and almost nothing of what we do need.” Discuss the meaning of this statement to your personal experiences.
6. What have been some of the ramifications you have noticed of the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the World, clashing? How have you been caught in the middle at times?
In what ways have you “suffered” for your faith?

7. What does the word, **Tribulation** mean to you? How have you heard it used in the church throughout the years?
8. Do you agree that as we have turned away from God, the world seems to be imploding? Give some examples of how and where you see that happening.
9. What does it mean that you are sealed by God? How does that allow you to move into the future with hope and security?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Ponder what it means to you, that you are sealed by God. Pray for those around you that may not have that same certainty and the ways that you can share your hope in Jesus with them.