SESSION 3

REVELATION 4:1–5:14 *The Heavenly Prelude to the Seal Judgments*

I. AN OVERVIEW OF JUDGMENT IN REVELATION 4–19

Beginning with chapter four, the book advances beyond the historic churches of John's day to consider the eschatological time when Jesus will be unveiled in judgment upon the world that has rejected him. This judgment will be initiated through a series of judgments known as the "seal judgments," which are in turn followed by two other series of judgments, the "trumpet judgments" and the "bowl judgments." Chapters 4–5 serve as a *heavenly prelude* to the revealing of these seal judgments, and in some sense a prelude to all three sets of judgments (since the "trumpets" and "bowls" are contained in the 7th seal). Before looking at the details of the prelude of chapters 4–5, it seems appropriate to give a descriptive sketch of the role these three cycles of judgments serve in the overall theme of Christ's judgment in Revelation.

Chapters 4–19 focus upon the eschatological age when God moves in judgment upon the ungodly world. In particular, it is a special time of chastisement upon Israel. This involves a conflict between the forces of evil (at the leadership of Satan) and the forces of good. Christ is <u>triumphant</u>: the ungodly world is judged, Israel is disciplined, and Satan is ultimately judged. In the midst of conflict, however, God's people are called upon to <u>endure</u> persecution and suffering, even martyrdom if need be, in Christ's battle. This is a testimony to all that was lacking in the 7 churches of chapters 2–3, and hence to all believers. Nevertheless, the outcome is certain as Christ returns, conquers, and reigns. The judgmental period is developed in five major movements involving three cycles of judgment and two sections focusing on the conflict between the powers of evil and the rule of God. Each cycle of judgment involves 7 judgments. Interestingly, each cycle is preceded by a heavenly prelude, and an interlude is placed between the sixth judgment and the seventh. The literary structure is outlined as follows:

A.	Cycle	One: The Seal Judgments (4:1-8:1)
	1.	Heavenly Prelude: The Source of the Scroll (4:1–5:14) a. Vision of the Heavenly Throne (4:1-11)
	2	b. The Seven-sealed Scroll (5:1-14)
	2.	Six Seal Judgments (6:1-17)
	3.	Interlude: The Followers of the Lamb (7:1-17)
		a. Sealing of the $144,000 - $ on earth (7:1-8)
		b. The Slain Multitude Out of the Tribulation – in heaven (7:9-17)
	4.	Seventh Seal (8:1)

B. <u>Cycle Two: The Trumpet Judgments (8:2–11:19)</u>

- 1. Heavenly Prelude (8:2-6)
 - 2. Six Trumpet Judgments (8:7–9:21)
- 3. Interlude (10:1–11:14)
 - a. The Mighty Angel and the Little Scroll (10:1-11)
 - b. The Two Witnesses (11:1-13)
 - 4. Seventh Trumpet (11:14-19)

C. <u>Conflict Section: Focus on the Opponents (12:1–14:20)</u>

- 1. The Woman and the Dragon (12:1-17)
- 2. The Two Beasts (13:1-18)
- 3. The Lamb with the 144,000 (14:1-5)
- 4. Announcements by Six Angels (14:6-20)

D. Cycle Three: The Bowl Judgments (15:1–19:10)

- 1. Heavenly Prelude (15:1–16:1)
- 2. Six Bowl Judgments (16:2-12)
- 3. Interlude (16:13-16)
- 4. The Seventh Bowl (16:17–19:10)
 - a. General Description of the 7th Bowl Judgment (16:17-21)
 b. Elaboration of Babylon's Judgment (17:1–19:10)
- E. Conflict Section: The Lamb's Triumph (19:11-22:5) 1. The Appearance of the King of kings (19:11-16) 2. The Defeat of the Two Beasts (19:17-21) The Binding of Satan (20:1-3) 3. 4. The Millennial Reign of Christ (20:4-6) 5. Satan's Final Attack and Judgment (20:7-10) The Great White Throne Judgment (20:11-15) 6. The New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–22:5) 7.

An examination of the three cycles of judgments reveals a particular connection between them. The bowl judgments seem to be contained in the seventh trumpet, and the trumpet judgments seem to be contained in the seventh seal. Thomas (1:43) refers to this as a "telescopic arrangement."¹ This is not to say that they are necessarily strictly chronologically successive, but there is probably a sequential arrangement of some sort.² Rather, the structure seems to reflect the development of the judgmental scheme, in particular the mounting intensity involved in each cycle. Mounce notes,

Each numbered series moves us closer to the end; not so much because it follows the preceding

¹ An alternative understanding for explaining the relationship between the seals, trumpets, and bowls is called the "recapitulation" theory. According to this theory, the trumpet series in 8:6ff. essentially covers the same ground as the seals had covered (i.e., describing events that are chronologically parallel but not necessarily identical). See Thomas (2:1-5) for elaboration. More discussion (including diagrams) will be given on the various views concerning the relationship of the judgments in the next session.

² See Davis for details ("The Relationship Between the Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls in the Book of Revelation," *JETS* 16 [1973], 149-151).

series in sequence, but because it <u>heightens</u> and <u>intensifies</u> the final and climactic confrontation of God and the forces of evil.³

Zane Hodges writes, "It is evident upon close scrutiny that each of the three sevenfold series brings the reader right up to the very end, yet dramatically withholds the final climax."⁴

Coinciding with this mounting intensity is a movement from general to specific in regard to the nature of the judgments. The seals begin with judgments that are very broad in terms of whom they affect. Yet by the time the bowls are set forth, many (though not all) of the judgments are more specific in their outreach. ⁵ For example, the 1st bowl is directed against those who had received the mark of the beast and who worshipped his image (16:2). This seems to reflect a divine intention to work a true repentance in those who do not believe in the Lamb and follow Him. The whole episode is a testing time as 3:10 reveals, "... the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth." As this *hour of testing* unfolds, we see that men resist the testimony of God that the judgments carry. Rather than turning to the Lamb of God, they turn to Satan's instrument, the Antichrist. One is astonished to discover that the seals alone do not drive mankind to humble repentance. Hence, each cycle of judgment seems to have a more specific and intensifying character, as mankind progressively hardens against God while aligning with the beast. Note the reactions in the course of each cycle:

Seals: 6:16-17	"and they said to the mountains, and to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him 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 stand."
Trumpets:	
9:6	"And in those days men will seek death and will not find it; and they will long to die and death flees from them."
9:20-21	"And the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk; and they did not repent of their murders nor of their sorceries nor of their immorality nor of their thefts."
Bowls:	
16:9	"And men were scorched with fierce heat; and they blasphemed the name of God who has the power over these plagues; and they did not repent, so as to give Him glory."
16:11	"And they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores; and they did not repent of their deeds."
16:21	" and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, because its plague was extremely severe."

In the seals, there is a desire to hide from God; in the trumpets, an unwillingness to repent is expressed; and in the bowls, men outrightly blaspheme God. Hence, there is <u>an increasing affront</u> made by God against the beast and those who follow him. This is particularly true when we reach the context of the "Bowl Judgments":

⁵This seems to parallel the strategy for the plagues against Egypt which eventually touched Pharaoh's own family.

³Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 205.

⁴Zane C. Hodges, "The First Horseman of the Apocalypse," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119 (1962): 329.

- 16:2 "... and it became a loathsome and malignant sore upon the men who had the ark of the beast and who worshipped his image."
- 16:6 "... for they poured out the blood of saints and prophets, and Thou hast given them blood to drink. They deserve it."
- 16:10 "And the fifth angel poured out his bowl upon the throne of the beast; and his kingdom became darkened."
- 16:14 "... go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them together for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty."
- 16:19 "... and Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath."

Climactically, the beast and his followers are met head-on by the One who comes riding on a white horse in 19:11ff. The cycles of judgments build up to this confrontation in which the true Lord and King completes the "hour of testing" by decisively conquering the beast and false prophet. This <u>accelerating movement towards conquest</u> on the part of Christ seems to be the undergirding motif to chapters 4–19. Indeed, the yearning by God's people for the hastening of Christ's reign and the avenging of the blood of the tribulation martyrs intensifies this motif (cf. 6:10; 11:17,18; 19:2). Finally, this expectation of "overcoming" in conquest is epitomized in 17:12-14: "... ten kings... receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour. These have one purpose and they give their power and authority to the beast. These will wage war against the Lamb, and <u>the Lamb will overcome them</u>, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful."

II. THE HEAVENLY PRELUDE IN CHAPTERS 4–5

- A. Context
 - 1. Connections of 4:1-2 with Ch. 1
 - a. The Development of the Book
 - (1) 1:19 "Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things."
 - (2) 4:1 "... Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things."
 - b. Same Voice
 - (1) 1:10 "... I heard behind me a loud voice like *the sound* of a trumpet."
 - (2) 4:1 "... and the first voice which I had heard, like *the sound* of a trumpet speaking with me."
 - c. Being "in the Spirit"
 - (1) 1:10 "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day"
 - (2) 4:2 "Immediately I was in the Spirit; ..."
 - d. What John Sees
 - (1) 1:12-16 Sees a vision of God the Son . . . the glorified Christ Jesus
 - (2) 4:2 Sees God the Father on the throne
 - e. Conclusion

These connections help clarify the macrostructure of the book. Hence, 4:1 ff. is a distinctive unit from the things in ch. 1–3. In ch. 1–3, John saw things in his day; in ch. 4 and following, he looks beyond his day (though not aware of how far beyond he is seeing). Notice that, in contrast to ch. 1, John is invited up to heaven for ch. 4ff.

2. The Matter of Judgment

- a. 3:10 "... I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that *hour* which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth."
- b. 4–5 Focus is on the Lamb who is worthy to open the <u>sealed</u> scroll in which is recorded the judgments by which God will test the world.
- B. The Identity of the 24 Elders (presbuterou")
 - 1. Question: Who are these "elders"? Possible suggestions include:
 - a. Special order of Angels So Thomas, Beasley-Murray, Ladd, Mounce. Leon Morris (following Charles) understands them to be the heavenly representatives of the whole body of the faithful (p 88).
 - b. Symbolic of the Redeemed of all TimeSo Hendriksen, and probably Swete (though he calls it "the Church").
 - c. Symbolic of the Church (raptured to heaven prior to the Tribulation) So Walvoord and Ryrie.
 - 2. The "New Song" Sung By the Elders (and the 4 Living Creatures) in Rev 5:9-10
 - a. The Translations
 - NASB "Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.
 And Thou hast made <u>them</u> to be a kingdom and priests to our God: and <u>they</u> will reign upon the earth."
 - (2) *KJV* "Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof; for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made <u>us</u> unto our God kings and priests; and <u>we</u> shall reign on the earth."
 - b. Issue If the correct reading is "made us/we shall reign", this would lend weight to the argument that the *elders* are redeemed believers.
 - c. Textual Problem
 - (1) them us
 - (a) "them" (autouV): $\mathfrak{H} \otimes A$ (so NASB, NIV)
 - (b) "us" (hma"): TR, Vg^{cl} (so KJV)
 - (2) "they will reign we will reign"
 (a) "they will reign" (basil eusousin): ℵ P M^{a(pt) b c d(pt) e(pt)}

[note: Ms A has the 3rd person, but in the present tense]

- (b) "we will reign" (basil eusomen): Vg^{cl} TR
- d. Conclusion

- (1) Textual evidence is clearly against the *KJV*. But this does not eliminate the "elders" as being redeemed believers.
- (2) There is a good case for the <u>future</u> tense: "they will reign upon the earth"(a) Not now, but some time in the future!
 - (b) On the earth!

Hence, this is a good case for premillennialism (and reinforces the premillennial view of Rev 20:1-6, which 5:10 seems to anticipate).

- 3. Biblical Role of Elders
 - a. Role of "elders" (זקנים) in the Old Testament
 - (1) General Usually older men in the community who were looked up to and respected, presumably being more spiritually mature and having wisdom.
 - (2) Ex 4:29-30 (cf. 3:16)
 Israelites of Moses' day had elders, even before Moses and Aaron came to them. They gave leadership by exercising authority for the whole.
 - Wilderness Period
 Elders had a leadership role and were responsible for major decisions and actions of the nation (Ex 19:7; 24:1,9; Num 11:16,24-25).
 - (4) They served as members of local councils in individual cities, responsible for judicial, political and military decisions (e.g., Ruth 4:9,11).
 - (5) Synagogues Elders were to be the more spiritually mature who gave leadership (note: before AD 70, this term was used of a group of officers in the Sanhedrin, the council of elders).
 - b. Role of "elders" in the New Testament

The church took over this function from the synagogue. The elders formed a presiding group who "ruled" (i.e., gave leadership; made decisions) over the affairs of the church (1 Tim 5:17; 3:5). Age requirement was not an absolute issue, but spiritual maturity was strictly demanded (Acts 20:17,28; 1 Tim 3:1ff.; Titus 1:5ff.).

- 4. Observations from Revelation
 - a. They are sitting on *thrones* (4:4) which probably is connected to Christ's rule over the nations.
 - (1) Notice how the preceding chapter ended (3:21; cf. 2:26-27): "He who <u>overcomes</u>, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne."
 - (2) Notice how the judgment period ends (20:4): "And I saw <u>thrones</u>, and they sat upon them . . ."
 - b. They have received "crowns" (4:4)
 - (1) Lexical Idea stef ano" (not $diad\bar{e}ma$)
 - This term is primarily used as a high mark of honor, rather than a kingly crown.⁶ This was especially used as a term for the victor's crown of leaves at the various athletic games. C. J. Hemer concludes,

⁶The Greek word stef ano" should be distinguished from $diad\bar{e}ma$. The latter is the more appropriate term for a badge of kingship (used 3x in the NT, all in the book of Revelation to signify kingship; 12:3, 13:1, and 19:2). The term stef ano" *can be* used of a kingly crown, though this is not the fundamental idea (stef ano" was used of the "crown of thorns" in Matt 27:29; Mk 15:17; and Jn 19:2,5).

stephanos in the NT is often the prize of athletic victory as a metaphor for the eternal reward of the faithful. *stephanos* or *stephano* \cap are used thus 1 Cor. 9:25; 2 Tim. 2:5; 4:8; Jas. 1:12 ("crown of life"); 1 Pet. 5:4 ("crown of glory"); Rev. 3:11; 4:4,10.⁷

- (2) Use in Revelation They are held out to the seven churches as *rewards* for "holding fast" and being "faithful until death" (3:11; 2:10).
- c. Role of the 24 Elders in Revelation Verses: 4:4,10; 5:5-6,8-11,14; 7:13-14; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4
 - (1) Distinct from the tribulation saints (7:13-14)
 - (2) Not symbolic of God; they worship God (5:14; 19:4)
 - (3) Not symbolic of "the Church" as a whole (7:9-12) [note: if one makes a sharp distinction between the Church and the tribulation believers, this argument might not be valid]
 - (4) Apparently, they are *individuals* (note 5:5 and 7:13-14!)
- d. They are arrayed in *white garments* (i**h**ativi" leukoi")
 - (1) Lexical Info.:
 - leukov used 23x in NT (14 of which are in Rev.)
 - 1. white (dominant meaning)
 - 2. bright, shining, gleaming
 - (2) Used in reference to 7 churches for those believers who were faithful and would be properly recognized
 - (a) "But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in <u>white</u>; for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in <u>white garments</u>...."
 (3:4-5)
 - (b) "I advise you to buy from Me ... white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and *that* the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed"

⁷Colin Brown, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1975), s.v. "stefano"," by C. J. Hemer, 1:406.

- (3) In the Tribulation Period
 - (a) 6:9-11 recognition to martyred believers
 - (b) 7:9-10 characterizes "great multitude" of redeemed believers who worship God and the Lamb
 - (c) 7:13-14 associated with those believers who came out of the Great Tribulation
 - (d) 15:6 angels are clothed in linen, "clean *and* bright" (καθαρον λ αμπρον)
 - (e) 19:14 characterizes those who come <u>with Christ</u> at His 2nd Coming
- (4) Rev 19:8 may be connected with acts done by believers (the bride of Christ)
- e. The Number "24"
 - (1) 1 Chr 24:1-19 the OT priesthood was divided into 24 divisions for the purpose of order and ministry. Note that the 24 elders do have a priestly function in 5:8 (though the same could be said of the 4 *living creatures*).
 - (2) 1 Chr 25:1-31 the musical leaders for the praise and worship of the OT Temple (to sing and play instruments) were organized into 24 divisions.
 - (3) In the New Jerusalem, there will be 12 gates with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel (Rev 21:12), and 12 foundation stones with the names of the 12 apostles (21:14).
 - (4) Isa 24:23 The number 24 is not mentioned, but the context corresponds closely to Revelation.

"Then the moon will be abashed and the sun ashamed, for the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and *His* glory will be before His <u>elders</u>."

Compare Isa 13:10 for a similar note of cosmic phenomena in the "Day of the Lord." Cf. Joel 2:10; 2:31; 3:15; Ez 32:27; Mt 24:29; Lk 21:25; and Rev 6:12; 8:12. The following context in Isa 25 does deal with kingdom blessing. Other possible data: Matt 19:28; Lk 22:28-30.

- (5) Other possible data: Matt 19:28; Lk 22
- 5. Conclusions

Admittedly, any interpretation of the 24 elders must be tenuous. Based on the factors that we are given, there does not seem to be anything that would clearly demand an angelic group.⁸ The crowns, thrones, white garments and titles of "elder" are linked in the Bible and especially in Revelation with human *believers* (though 15:6 might be an exception in regard to the *linen garments*). Furthermore, these factors tend to suggest that they have been found faithful and have been given a particularly high responsibility as a reward of their walk and service to God. Two things would suggest that they are <u>not</u> symbolic of the Church as a whole: (1) the descriptives seem to be associated with special reward (not what every Christian will receive) and (2) the elders function in an individual capacity at certain points (5:5; 7:13-14).

C. The "Four Living Creatures"

There seems to be some close parallels between these and the *four living beings* of Ezekiel ch. 1. Note the attention to faces, wings and eyes. According to Ezek 10:15, the *four living beings* of Ezekiel are "cherubim," a special group of angels. Although the details differ in some respects, the

⁸ For a survey of the views with the conclusion that these are a special class of angels of high authority (24 in number), see Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7; An Exegetical Commentary*, 344-48. He reasons,

[&]quot;In this book they are always grouped with angels rather than men, but are distinguished from other angelic subgroups (cf. 7:9-11; 19:1-4) (Ladd). That they are such a class of angels is well borne out when one of the elders performs the same function of offering bowls of incense that is later performed by an angel (cf. 5:8; 8:3)" (p 348).

"four living creatures" of Rev 4-5 also seem to be an angelic category.9

D. The Relation of Worship and Judgment in Rev 4–5

These chapters contain five songs of worship. These should be correlated with the context of judgment that these chapters occur in.

- 1. 4:11 God is the Creator and thus has the right to govern His creation. He is righteous to judge His creation which has turned its back on Him and blasphemed Him.
- 2. 5:9 God, as Redeemer, has the right to bring judgment upon those who have rejected His redemptive plan.
- 3. 5:13 Notice that God the Father and the Lamb (Jesus) receive the same worship and glory. This is a good argument for the deity of Christ! In the OT, God declared "My glory I will not give to another" (Isa 42:8; 48:11).

⁹ So Thomas (358). For a good survey and discussion of views, see pp 355-58.