

Revelation 6
Psalm 89
Psalm 89

"The Seven Seals: God's Sermon"

August 18, 2019

Psalm 89 is the last song in Book 3 of the Psalter.

Book 3 of the Psalms (Psalms 73-89) consists of the songs of the Exile.

Psalm 89 – in particular – asks God *how long* until he restores his promises to David?
How long until you restore your city – your people?

Psalm 89 tells a story – the story of God's dealings with David and with Jerusalem.

There are three distinct sections to Psalm 89 –
each with a dramatic transition.

The first section (verses 1-18) introduce God's rule over Creation –
then in verse 19 we hear that God – the ruler of all Creation –
has raised up a *man* – David – to his throne.

Verses 19-37 then describe God's covenant with David –
how David is the firstborn son of God – the one whose throne will endure forever.
But then in verse 38 – we hear that God has rejected his covenant with David.
And verses 38-52 express the consternation and questioning that comes from this.
First, comes the description of how God has rejected David.
And then comes the question – how long?
Please – remember your covenant!

Now, the tune that we've selected for Psalm 89
has a dramatic transition right in the middle of the tune.

And, fittingly, the two most dramatic transitions in the Psalm (verses 18-19 and 37-38)
come right at that point in the tune!

Sing Psalm 89 (stanzas 1-5)

Read stanzas 6-10

Sing stanzas 11-13

Read Revelation 6

Introduction: The Liturgy of the Heavenly Temple (Rev. 4:1-22:5)

Remember that Jesus was called the "Lion of Judah" in chapter 5?

He is the Son of David who brings the answer to the question, "how long?!"

In chapters 4-5 we saw that we are gathered at the heavenly throne –

and we will need to remember that picture –

because every other part of the rest of the book of Revelation

continues to show forth the heavenly liturgy before the throne.

Here we see the Lord God sitting on his throne,
holding a scroll – written on both sides, sealed with seven seals.

And as we see here in chapter 6,
this scroll contains the purposes of God for history.
As the seals are opened, the scroll unveils the word of the Lord –
the plans and purposes of God for what must take place after this.

(At the end of the book of Daniel,
Daniel was told to seal up the book until the end.
Now the seals will be opened – and we will be able to *hear* what is about to take place.)

But in chapter 5 there was a problem!
Even in heaven there is a problem!
Why is there a problem in heaven?
Because there is *no one* who is worthy to open the scroll.

God is holding in his hand a document that contains his purposes for history.
But in order for this document to be opened,
someone else must open it.

Indeed, as Psalm 89 suggested, it must be the Son of David –
the one who God called as his firstborn.
But the problem – as Psalm 89 also showed us –
is that the sons of David failed.

There must be one among the sons of David who will be found worthy!
And so John wept.
Indeed, John wept *loudly*.
If no one is worthy – then we are all doomed!

But now Jesus – the Lion of the tribe of Judah – has triumphed
The Lion who has become the Lamb who was slain...

And *he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne*.
In other words, Jesus now has authority to implement the Father's book –
to put into effect the plans and purposes of God for all of history!

Each of the sevens in the book of Revelation function as a proclamation of the Word of God.
Seven seals – seven trumpets – seven bowls.
And each of the sevens proclaim what will happen
in between the ascension of Christ and the final judgment.
In other words, in the heavenly liturgy, God's sermon consists of all of history.
Your life – your sufferings – even your death –
is all a part of God's purposes for history.

So – now we are ready to hear what is in this scroll!!
What is in God’s sermon!!

1. The Four Living Creatures Say “Come” – the First Four Seals (6:1-8)

The first four seals are heralded by the four living creatures.

Who are the four living creatures?

The first has a face like a lion, the second like an ox, the third with the face of a man,
and the fourth like an eagle in flight.

In Ezekiel 1, the four living creatures *each* had four faces –
lion, ox, man, and eagle.

So we are definitely seeing the same four living creatures here –
perhaps each one is only showing one face to John at the moment!

The four living creatures are the cherubim (Ezekiel 10 clearly identifies them as such).
They are the guardians of God’s holiness.

But the four living creatures call forth four horsemen.

The four horsemen connect back to Zechariah 1 and 6,
In Zechariah, the four horsemen were just on patrol –
watching the nations that harmed God’s people.
Now, their time of watching is over.
Now the time for judgment has come!

King Jesus sits on the throne.
And he sends out the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

Where is God in the midst of catastrophe?
God is sitting on the throne.
Indeed, the command for such catastrophes comes from the scroll that Jesus opens.
Our Lord Jesus is the one who brings catastrophes on the earth.

In short, “Rev. 6:1-8 describe the operation of the destructive forces
that were unleashed immediately on the world
as a result of Christ’s victorious suffering on the cross, his resurrection,
and his ascent to a position of rule at his Father’s right hand.” (B, 371)

In the ascension of Jesus, there is now a Son of David – a Son of Man –
sitting at the right hand of God.
Therefore, the heavenly hosts now go into motion in bringing about
the kingdom of Jesus!

Now, at first you might think that these sorts of judgments are only for those who don’t believe.
But remember the letters to the seven churches!!
Five of the seven churches were doing *very badly* –

and Jesus warns several of them that he will come in judgment *against them*.
So these judgments are for Christians as much as anyone else.
Judgment begins with the household of God! (1 Peter 4:17)

a. The First Seal: The Conqueror on a White Horse (6:1-2)

Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, “Come!”² And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.

This is the living creature that is “like a lion” (4:7).

And the rider on a white horse comes with his bow and crown –
and he goes forth to conquer!

Some have thought that the rider on the white horse is Jesus.

Because in Revelation the color white is generally good –
and Jesus is the one who conquers his enemies!

On the other hand, the ‘beast’ of Revelation also conquers –
so conquering enemies is not necessary a sign of goodness!

So it would be better to say that these riders are agents of God’s wrath
who bring destruction on the earth.

(But as we’ll see with the fourth rider – even Death and Hades obey the voice of Jesus.

b. The Second Seal: The Destroyer of Peace on a Red Horse (6:3-4)

³ When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!”⁴ And out came another horse, bright red.

Then Jesus opens the second seal,
and the second living creature says ‘Come’ –
this is the living creature that is “like an ox” (4:7).

And then comes the rider on a bright red horse.

Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

This rider is not a conqueror.

This rider is one who sows disorder and chaos –
who turns people against each other.

The Roman empire was proud of the ‘pax Romana’ – the ‘Peace of Rome.’

The peace of Rome was based on a simple principle:
submit to Rome, and you will have peace!

Jesus rejects the peace of Rome,
and instead establishes the “Peace of Christ” –

submit to Jesus, and you will have peace!

The Peace of Rome insists that all other allegiances
be subordinated to Rome.

And so there is a way in which the Peace of the City of God
is ultimately opposed to the Peace of the city of man.

And so King Jesus sends out a rider to “take peace from the earth,
so that people should slay one another
[and in token of that] he was given a great sword.”

It is really important to recognize that *King Jesus* has sent this rider.

Why are people killing each other on the streets of South Bend?
Because they have refused to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ!

They have insisted on putting their trust in the Peace of their Gang –
or the Peace of America –
or some other Peace.

And if the Peace of Rome (or any other Peace) is allowed to win the hearts and minds
of the human race –
then there will be no peace with God –
and this world will just continue forever in its reckless path!

We often think that our society’s sin and corruption will *bring* the judgment of God.
What we forget is that very often our society’s sin and corruption *is* the judgment of God!

Are you struggling a bit to see *Jesus* as the one who sends this rider out?

Do we have a hard time thinking of Jesus as one who *removes peace*?!
But remember what Jesus said in Matthew 10:34 –

“Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth.
I did not come to bring peace but a sword.”

Jesus came to bring division – for the moment!!

As Christians, we’re used to thinking of the coming of Jesus
as the coming of the Prince of Peace – for that *is* what Jesus came to do!

But what happens when people refuse to submit to the Prince of Peace?

What happens when people make *war* on the Prince of Peace?!
Well, the result is suffering for the people of Jesus.
We suffer – we are afflicted – so that salvation might come to the nations.

I think this is the thing that bothers me the most
about the way that we talk about persecution today.

We tend to say: “Oh no, Christians are suffering – this needs to stop!!”
And we try to rally political support to end the persecution of Christians!

Now, it is a good thing to end persecution!
And we *should* come to the aid of those who are being treated unjustly!

But what should our *basic* attitude be towards persecution?

Father Boules George, of St. Mark Church in Cairo,
said it really well right after the Palm Sunday bombing in Egypt a couple years ago.

A message to those who kill us: What will we say to them? The first thing we will say is, “Thank you very, very much,” and you won’t believe us when we say it. You know why we thank you? I’ll tell you. You won’t get it, but please believe us.

You gave us to die the same death as Christ — and this is the biggest honor we could have. Christ was crucified — and this is our faith. He died and was slaughtered — and this is our faith. You gave us, and you gave them to die...

Thank you for helping us achieve our goal. You’re helping us, and you don’t even know it. I know you don’t understand, but I’m trying to explain it to you. There are people we visited at home to encourage them to come to church — three, four, five times. Still they won’t come... People who were living in sin and away from God, after the bombing of St. Peter’s Chapel in the Cathedral, they were saying, “You never know when your number’s up. Better take more care [in our spiritual lives].” All these visitations we do — you’re so much more effective. You’re filling up our churches!...

The second part of the message we want to send to you is that we love you. And this, unfortunately, you won’t understand at all. Maybe you won’t believe us when we say we’re grateful. But this, you won’t even understand. Why won’t you understand it? Because this too is a teaching of our Christ. I want to explain to you about our Christ. I want to tell you about how wonderful he is.

See what Christ said: If you love those who love you, you have no profit or reward with me. Even thugs and thieves love those who love them. Any gang loves its members. Even the drug dealers all like each other and take care of each other. Right? But I want to tell you that “if you love those who love you, what reward have you ... but I say to you, love your enemies” (Matthew 5:46, 44)...

I love you very much. And I want to say one last thing to you: we’re praying for you. Because the One who told us to love you told us to “bless those who curse you ... and pray for those who spitefully use you” (Matthew 5:44). So my instructions from my loving God make it my duty to pray for you.

<http://catholicphilly.com/2017/05/commentaries/coptic-priests-message-to-terrorists-thank-you-and-we-love-you/>

Father George got it right!
Yes, King Jesus has sent his emissaries “to take peace from the earth” –

but the purpose of this is to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.
And so we do not think of persecution as a ‘political problem’
to be solved by political action committees.
Rather, our suffering and affliction is designed by King Jesus to result
not only in *our* salvation –
but also in the salvation of the nations.
Therefore, we endure the afflictions and troubles of this age –
because we *know* where the story is going!
We *know* that Jesus is going to make everything right in the end!

We know that the Peace of Christ *will* endure!
And you can take that to the bank!
(I use that turn of phrase because of what we see in the third seal!)

c. The Third Seal: The Bringer of Famine on a Black Horse (6:5-6)

5 When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand.

And when Jesus opens the third seal,
the third living creature says ‘Come!’
This is the living creature that has “the face of a man” (4:7)

And now comes a black horse, whose rider has a pair of scales in his hand –
in other words, this rider has to do with the economic realm.

6 And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, “A quart^[a] of wheat for a denarius,^[b] and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!”

Notice where the voice is coming from:
“the midst of the four living creatures.
Who is in the midst of the four living creatures?
The one seated on the throne –
and the Lamb.

So this is the voice of Jesus.

Jesus says that wheat and barley (basic food) will get really expensive –
while oil and wine will not.

Some say that this is talking about famine – scarcity –
where food costs will go through the roof.
But notice that the olive trees and the grape vines will not be affected.

So this isn't an ordinary famine.

This is a man-made famine.

The early Christians were often subjected to increased prices because of their faith.

We are used to going to the store and seeing price tags on everything.

Not so in the ancient world.

The price could change from customer to customer.

"The bread is 2 bucks a loaf – but for you, I'll take a dollar!"

When I was at Wrigley Field this summer, I saw this in action –

a street vendor had a sign saying:

"Water - \$2 for Cubs fans, \$4 for Dodger fans, White Sox fans can die of thirst"

In the Roman world, everyone belonged to some patronage network or another.

You would be under the protection of some important person –

and in return, you would support him in his efforts and endeavors.

One way that you would show your support is by showing up at his feasts –
held at the local temple.

If you didn't show up, then you would no longer be under his protection –
and so when you do business in the market,
you won't get preferred pricing –
you'll be treated like Dodger fans –

or worse, like White Sox fans at Wrigley!

You'll pay twice as much – if they'll let you buy food at all!

At a sporting event it can be funny.

But in the market place – you could find yourself unable to eat.

Faith in Jesus Christ could wind up *costing you money*.

If you refuse to engage in the idolatry of your workplace,
you could be passed over for that promotion.

Or maybe that promotion would require you to work on Sundays –
or to travel so much that you wouldn't be able to be the husband and father
that Christ calls you to be –
so you remain in a lesser-paying job.

But Jesus is Lord of the marketplace.

It is *his decree* that sets prices.

Again, that may sound a little troubling at first –

"Wait, *Jesus* is the one who is behind the troubles of his people?!!"

But if you think about it,
there is comfort there!

Your troubles are not random events outside of your Savior's control!

No, he has commanded them –

and therefore they serve *his* purposes for you!

d. The Fourth Seal: Death on a Pale Horse (6:7-8)

⁷ When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!”

⁸ And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

The fourth living creature is “like an eagle in flight” (4:7)

And when Jesus opens the fourth seal,
the fourth cherub says, “Come” –
and John looks and sees a pale horse –
and it’s rider’s name was Death –
and Hades followed him.

Hades is the Greek term for the underworld.

It was regularly used in the Greek translation of the OT to translate “Sheol” –
the realm of death.

Even Death and Hades obey the command of King Jesus.

Jesus triumphed over Death and Hades in his resurrection.
After all, Jesus had descended into the grave –
he went down into the realm of death –
because he suffered and died for us.

But because Jesus has triumphed over death and Hades –
therefore Death and Hades must obey *his commands*.

And so Death is fourth rider of the apocalypse.

And Death and Hades have authority over a fourth of the earth –
“to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence
and by wild beasts of the earth.”

That last phrase is a quote from Ezekiel 14:21.

In Ezekiel 14, God says that he will judge his people for their wickedness –
using sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence.

Of course, Ezekiel’s language was itself drawn from Leviticus 26:18-28,
where God warned that if they rebelled,
he would use famine and sword and pestilence
and wild beasts to judge his people.

Now, in Revelation 6, Death and Hades are sent by Jesus against a fourth of the earth.

War, plague, famine, and wild beasts
are the means that God uses to bring judgment on all the earth –
but especially since the resurrection of Jesus,
these means are used to execute God’s purposes

in furthering the kingdom of his beloved Son!

As one commentator puts it,
“God intended that the suffering of the cross
should have both a redemptive and a judicial purpose
(i.e.,... the cross becomes a basis of judgment for those rejecting its saving significance).
In like manner, the sufferings throughout the following age have the same aim....
And, as with Jesus, the apparent defeat of Christians is their spiritual victory,
if they do not compromise their faith in the midst of suffering or persecution.” (B, 385)

And in case you are wondering why I mention persecution so much –
listen to what happens when Jesus opens the fifth seal:

2. The Souls Under the Altar Cry Out for Vengeance – the Fifth and Sixth Seals (6:9-17)

a. The Fifth Seal: The Martyrs Plead for Vengeance (6:9-11)

i. Notice Where They Are: Under the Altar – Connected to Jesus (v9)

⁹ 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.

So far the ravages of Death and Hades have appeared indiscriminate.

War, famine, pestilence, wild animals –
all these things are a part of God’s *common wrath*.

I use the term ‘common wrath’ as a parallel to the idea of ‘common grace.’

We talk about how the sun shines on the just and the unjust –
how God has a general kindness toward all that he has made –
and we call that ‘common grace.’

In the same way *bad stuff* happens to the just and the unjust.

Hurricanes don’t care whether you believe in Jesus or not!
Disease doesn’t ask ‘have you been a good person?’

You don’t have to be an awful person for bad stuff to happen to you –
you just have to be a member of the human race!

And yet –

the fifth seal reveals that those who have been slain “for the word of God
and for the witness they had borne”
have a special place under the altar.

Why are they under the altar?

The heavenly altar is where Jesus presented his blood before the Father (Heb 9:12).
And so those who share in his sufferings – those who are faithful unto death,
and die bearing witness to Jesus –

these souls are now found where Jesus is.

The Christian life is characterized by the cross –
Paul calls us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God.

We heard earlier from Father George – our Coptic brother –
speaking of the love that we are to have for our enemies.
That is true – Jesus taught us to love our enemies! –
but love and justice are not opposed to each other!

And so the souls under the altar cry out:

ii. Vengeance Is a Good Thing – Bringing Justice (v10)

¹⁰ *They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”*

Vengeance is a good thing.
Does that sound strange?
Well, think about the scripture that says, “Vengeance is mine, says the Lord”
If vengeance belongs to God – then vengeance is a good thing!
It is good for God to avenge the death of the innocent.

The idea is that the souls under the altar want God to vindicate them –
by judging the “earth-dwellers”
(earth-dweller will be used throughout Revelation
to speak of those who are hostile to God.
After all, believers are those who are citizens of a heavenly kingdom –
and so unbelievers are those who are ‘earth-dwellers’ –
they are earthly-minded, earthly-oriented –
they care not for heavenly things.)

But the answer is “wait”:

iii. But Not Yet – We Must Endure Suffering with Them (v11)

¹¹ *Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers^[c] should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.*

They are given white robes (the idea of purity – faith refined by testing) –
and they are told to rest a little longer –
just wait, “until their number is made complete.”

We’ll hear about that number next time
(the 144,000 – the multitude that cannot be counted).
But here the point is that they need to wait until the rest of their fellow servants are killed!

The point for *us* is to encourage us to be faithful unto death.
God *will* be faithful to his promise to bring vengeance against those who do us harm –

therefore we know that our patient perseverance in loving our enemies
with the love of Christ
will not be in vain!

And then Jesus opens the sixth seal
as a way of answering the plea of the saints!

b. The Sixth Seal: The Wrath of the Lamb (6:12-17)

i. The Earth and Sky Show That Judgment Is at Hand (v12-14)

¹² 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,¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.¹⁴ The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

This is a description of the coming of the final judgment and the end of the world!

The prophets frequently use this imagery – Isaiah 13, 24 and 34, Joel 2-3, and more.

Verses 12-14 begin and end with the shaking of the earth

(earthquake in verse 12 and mountains and islands being moved in verse 14).

In between we have the shaking of the heavens!

The sun turns black, the moon turns red, the stars fall to the earth –
and the sky rolls up like a scroll.

This is the dissolution of the created order.

All of the order that God established is undone.

Don't try to take all this literally.

The point is that all creation – heaven and earth –
shows that judgment is at hand.

And certainly, the ‘earth-dwellers’ see it that way!

ii. Rebellious Humanity Tries to Hide from the Wrath of God (v15-17)

¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave^[d] and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains,¹⁶ 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,¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

It starts at the top of society.

The kings of the earth – and all the great ones of the earth – the rich and the powerful –
this phrase is taken from Isaiah 34 –

all shall hide themselves in the caves – searching for a place to hide from God.

But not just the ‘great ones.’

Its everyone – slave and free – all those who are ‘earth-dwellers’ –

all those who have opposed the Peace of Christ!
And when they see the coming of the day of judgment,
 they see exactly what is happening!
And so they call to the mountains and the 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?”

The Day of the LORD is upon us!
 The wrath of the Lamb!

You wouldn't think that you should be afraid of a Lamb!
 But *this* Lamb is also the Lion of Judah.
 And he has triumphed.

“The earth-dwellers have not trusted in the Lamb who was slain for the sin of the world.
Therefore they will have to suffer his destructive wrath
 and will not be able to withstand it.” (B, 403)

The message of the scroll is that Judgment Day is coming.
In the middle of history there will be lots of troubles and afflictions and suffering.
In the middle of history we will face all sorts of financial hardships.
In the middle of history there will be wars and famines and diseases.
In the middle of history Death will continue to haunt humanity.

But King Jesus is on the throne.
He rules over the heavens and the earth.
All things – even Death and Hades – obey his command.

Jesus wants you to know that the day of his Wrath – the Wrath of the Lamb –
is coming.