

Revelation: The Triumph of the Lamb
The Seal Judgments, Pt. 2
Fifth and Sixth Seals
6:9-17

Text:

¹ 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.

³ When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” ⁴ And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

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

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.

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. 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?” 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 should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

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.

¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave 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?”

Introduction:

We did not have time last week to look fully at the seal judgments. We were only to take the first section of the seals which was 6:1-8 and the first four seal judgments. The first four go together as a unit as they are each one linked with theme of horse and rider. Today we will examine the next two seals, #'s 5 and 6 before the seal judgments are interrupted with a brief interlude in chapter 7. You will notice that the 7th seal does not come until v.1 of chapter 8.

Everything about the book of Revelation deals with perspective. God wants his church to have perspective. The way we get perspective is to see things the way God sees things. The aim of every Christian should be to think God's thoughts after him. Human beings, created in the image of God, are by nature interpreters. That is, we all seek to make sense out of everything. We are constantly offering our take on things whether it is politics, news stories, the behavior patterns of children, or whatever. We are always offering our perspective.

In the broader world of philosophy, each person has a world view. We all have a grid through which we filter the world around us and what comes through the grid is our take on the world. Now whether or not a person can define his / her grid, his/ her world view is beside the point. Regardless of whether or not we can identify our world view, we all have one.

The way the book of Revelation is going to help us get this God's eye perspective is to introduce us to two worlds – one heavenly and one earthly. John will be given a vision depicting the earthly realm and then instantly be shown another vision depicting the heavenly realm. Sometimes the visions correspond. In other words, while John is seeing the vision depicting the earthly events, another vision pops up to demonstrate what is simultaneously going on in the heavenly realm.

Given our modern medium of film and television, this is not difficult for us to grasp. We are all very adept at following timelines when the scene leaves our hero in order to change scenes and show how the villain is preparing his stage. We understand this kind of scenery shift through the idiomatic expression, "Meanwhile, back at the ranch..."

This kind of scenery shift takes place time and again throughout Revelation. The scene will shift from one vision to the next and back again, or it may shift from earth to heaven in the same vision. So we have to pay attention to these scenery shifts. They are aimed at giving us, what I call a God's eye view. When you see warring nations and societal upheaval and social destruction and senseless violence and disease and famine, John receives a vision that shows behind the scenes. Or, to be more accurate, he is shown a vision that shifts from the mere earthly drama to the heavenly drama. Nothing happens on earth that has not already happened in heaven.

The newspaper reports simply read, "Rome made advances today on a tiny nation east of Pompeii. Roman generals sacked and secured yet another country, thus expanding its empire by another 1,000 square miles." The poor people of the sacked country experienced the horror of siege, famine, battle and bloodshed. Mothers and fathers mourned the loss of life and horrific fall-out of military conquest. Neighboring villages and nations increased in the grip of fear and terror knowing that their day of destruction and plunder is ever closer.

Jerusalem has been completely sacked. Nero has slain hundreds of Jewish Christians throughout the Roman Empire. The entire Jewish world has been catapulted into near extinction – or so they wonder. Nero passes off of the scenes only to be replaced by Domitian who is ten times more ruthless. There will be more bloodshed yet.

So what is a Christian supposed to make of all of this? Should they be gripped by fear and terror? Is all hope gone? Are we all simply at the hands of mere fate?

God breaks in one day on one of the Apostle John's naps and gives him dreams like you could not believe. He reveals to John exactly that which every Christian needs to know in order to maintain hope and faith in the midst of the worst of life's situations. He delivers the visions of Revelation.

He first gives John a vision of the Son of Man, the resurrected and triumphant Son of God: Jesus Christ. "John, all is well. I am firmly established at the right hand of God on high. Tell the churches that I am walking among them even now. I know each one of their circumstances. I know the churches that are strong and vibrant, pure and holy. I know the churches that are suffering severely at the hands of persecution. I know the churches that are succumbing to the seductions of this world. I know the churches that are wavering and following deceptive heresies. Tell them, John that I know their works; that I will snuff out their flame if they continue in their slumber; tell them that I will richly reward the names written in the book of life and they shall eat at the tree of life for ever and ever. I will make them pillars in the house of God if they will give ear to hear what the Spirit says."

Next, Jesus says, "Show them God." In John's second vision he sees heaven opened and there is a scene that he could never possibly describe. He sees the Almighty, ineffable God seated on his throne. He is absolutely awesome and terrifying to behold. There is no approaching him. He is completely separate and removed from sinful man.

In his right hand John noticed that God held a scroll sealed with seven seals. It was a very important document written on the front and on the back. It contains the full disclosure of God's plan for redemption and final judgment. A strong challenge was issued forth throughout the whole universe to see if anyone dare approach God with the necessary power and right to open the seals and carry out its decrees. No one was found worthy, thus John wept bitterly. There is no hope. No one will be able carry out God's plan for judgment and redemption.

Alas, a cry thundered forth, "Behold, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah – the Lamb slain – the Triumphant Lamb – He is worthy to take the scroll and open its seals and enact its decrees." At that sight all heaven and earth began to worship and praise.

So John watched as the Lamb took the scroll and began to slit the seals one-by-one. With the opening of each of the first four seals one of the four beasts that surrounded the throne of God summoned a horse and rider. To each one of them God gave the authority to carry out judgment. The first rider on the white horse was given the right to conquer militarily; the second rider on the red horse was permitted to take peace from the earth; the third rider on the black horse was allowed to create famine; then the fourth rider on the pale horse came after with disease and wild beast and death and the grave were his companion.

"John, do you see? Even when Rome is conquering and even now as the Parthian hordes are threatening Rome's eastern border, so too, know that each conquering nation and all

social upheaval and societal unrest and all famine and disease and death is even now a trickle of God's judgment."

"Yes, but God, in the conquering of nations and the societal upheaval some of your very own people are being blamed and put to death."

"John, look at the altar. See the souls of my slain martyrs. Listen to their cries. I hear them, John."

Revelation 6:9-11 (ESV)

⁹When 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. ¹⁰They 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?" ¹¹Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

So John looks at the altar. Now this altar is going to play a prominent role moving forward in the book of Revelation. Go to 8:3

³And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, ⁴and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.

There is an important connection between the prayers of the saints in 8:3 and the cry of the saints here in 6:10. That is, the content of the prayers of 8:3 are the cries of 6:10. This connects the seal and trumpet judgments. We'll come to that in a few weeks.

But the again, in 16:6-7:

⁶For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!" ⁷And I heard the altar saying, "Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!"

Chapter 16 is the bowl judgments. God does avenge for the blood of the martyrs, but not yet. That is the message of chapter 6.

When John looks at the altar he sees a sacrificial altar. This is an altar like the one in the Temple where animals were offered and their blood fell into a basin under the altar. So here he sees the souls of the slain (same word used of the Lamb in 5:6) martyrs under the altar. That is what he saw. What did he hear?

He heard their cries, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Now this is not the cry, as some have commented, of bitter and vengeful Christians who want to get even. These souls are not violating the New testament teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, for instance. They are, instead, crying out for the fulfillment of all things. "How long Lord until you bring all things to fruition?" Even the souls of the martyrs know that it is nothing but the longsuffering patience of God that restrains the full fury of his wrath. "How long, Lord, until the end?"

It is the Lord's response that is interesting. "The Lord's response to the martyrs' appeal for speedy justice is a gift and a strange word of hope," according to Dennis Johnson.¹ That is, the martyrs are given a gift and they given a strange word of hope.

The gift that the martyrs are given is a white robe of victory. These robes are the apparel of the conquerors in Revelation 3:4-5, you recall. The sacrificial death of martyrdom was the means by which they overcame the enemy. We are going to see this group again in just a few verses when we see the interlude of chapter 7. Look at 7:9:

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, **clothed in white robes**, with palm branches in their hands,¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

There is a drastic contrast here to the way they are depicted in chapter 6, isn't there? In ch.6 they are singing the minor key, "How long Lord?" Here they are singing the triumphant hymn, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

The word of hope that they are given is strange indeed. They are "told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been."

This word of hope is foreshadowing the benediction that comes in 14:13:

¹³ And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!"

The word of hope is, "Rest, souls; your work is done. You're done. You have finished victoriously!"

When we come to Bible prophecy and the book of Revelation, we are tempted to ask the question, "When will these things be? When will the Lord return?" Well, you will find an answer to that question in v.11. Jesus will not return, "until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been."

The Bible gives us two clear statements about the timing of Christ's return. The one is here. God's eschatological calendar is marked by the blood of the saints. The other is in Matt. 24:14:

¹⁴ **And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.**

And is there not a direct correlation between the two? How can you take the gospel to Christ-hating, cross-despising nations if you have no theology of martyrdom?

Listen to me, Americans. We have no theology of martyrdom today in our evangelical circles. For 200 years we have sat in security and comfort and lost our theology of martyrdom. Why do you need a theology of martyrdom when the State is friendly to Christianity? How can you have a theology of martyrdom when the Church is comfortable

¹ See Johnson, p.125-126 for this section.

in the world? And could it be that we so few missionaries today because we have no theology of martyrdom? We don't want to give up the comforts of home; we talk our children out of going to hard places.

Have you listened closely to the Apostle Paul?

Philippians 3:8-11 (ESV)

⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Colossians 1:24 (ESV)

²⁴ Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church,

There is a theology of martyrdom in those words.

There are three enemies to the church of God and we have already met them in the letters to the seven churches. Later on in the book, John will be shown visions that put a picture to these enemies. They are:

- The Beast – the State – any gov't that demands allegiance and tempts us to abandon Christ (In John's day it was Rome with its Emperor worship)
- The False Prophet – any false teaching / religion that attempts to deceive us so that we will abandon Christ
- The Harlot – any pleasures and comforts of this world that tempt us to be unfaithful to Christ

We will not be safe from them if we do not have a bed-rock theology that can trust God in the face of martyrdom.