

Christ Opens the Seals of Judgment

Revelation 6:1–17

Studies in Revelation #15

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Most Americans do not like history. To quote Henry Ford, “History is bunk.” We may not have liked it in school because it was taught in a static way, with names, places, and dates that all made no sense in terms of how they went together.

As we turn to Revelation 6 this morning we see that history is dynamic! The Lord Jesus Christ at his ascension was alone worthy to take the scroll of God’s plan and purpose for human history and was alone worthy to open the seals that kept that plan secret. And so history from the vantage point of the Christian worldview is *His-story*; it is the story of God’s will being played out through us. And at the center of that story is Jesus Christ, the Savior of the church and the Lord of the history of the universe. He is “the ruler of kings on earth” (1:5) and he is the lamb of God by whose blood he “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (5:9).

History, then, is the story of God’s will coming to pass. It’s the execution of his will to save a people for himself by the blood of the lamb, but what we also see in our text this morning is that as *Christ Opens the Seals of Judgment*, history is the execution of God’s will to judge the living and the dead both in this life but especially at the Second Coming of the Lord.

1. *The Calamity on Earth: Seals 1–4 (vv. 1–8)*
2. *The Cry in Heaven: Seal 5 (vv. 9–11)*
3. *The Cataclysm at the End: Seal 6 (vv. 12–17)*

The Calamity on Earth: Seals 1–4 (vv. 1–8)

With Christ's opening of the first four seals we see *the calamity on earth*. Notice how chapter 6 seamlessly continues the scene of chapter 5: **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!"** (v. 1) It's not that John is summoned to **come** but as verse 2 goes on to say, it's a horse that comes forth: **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.**

The vision John sees is in the terms of the prophet Zechariah's visions in Zechariah 1 and 6. Zechariah had a vision of four horses and four chariots of judgment upon the whole earth. Ask yourself, "What does a horse signify or symbolize?" Horses stand for strength, terror, and warfare. Up until World War I to have a large cavalry gave an army the edge over an army of just infantry.

Many people get hung up on trying to identify who this "white horse" is. Some say he's the antichrist.¹ Others says he's the Lord Jesus, emphasizing that he's on a **white horse** signifying that he's heavenly and holy and that he's wearing a **crown**. The problems with this are that the passage in chapter 19 says he has a sword and many diadems not a bow and just one crown. Also this rider and horse

¹ See Chuck Smith, *What The World Is Coming To: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation*.

are linked with the following three horses, based on the prophet Zechariah.² In other words, if Jesus is the rider on the first horse then why is he not the rider on all four? This is a vision, beloved, and the identification of the rider is not the point; the point is that God's plan and purpose is coming to pass.

With the second horses the calamity begins to come in view: **And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword** (v. 4). These are the “wars and rumors of wars” that our Lord spoke of (Matt. 24:6). And so world wars, civil wars, terrorism, and the persecution of God's people are all wrapped up in this **slay[ing] of one another**. These are a part of God's judgments in this life. These are the results of God giving us up to the sins we love (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). These are God's allowing the sinfulness of sin to boil over in the hearts of humanity.

Famine is also a part of this judgment: **And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. 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!”** (vv. 5–6) What does this mean? One day's wages for a field worker was one denarius. One day's ration of grain for a soldier was one

² For the view that the rider on the white horse is *not* Jesus Christ, see Johnson, 118–120. For the view that the rider *is* Jesus Christ, see Hendricksen, 93–96. For an alternate view that the rider is the conquering power of Christ in his church and visible ordinances, see Ramsey, 314–315.

quart. So this is enough food for one person for one day. The problem is that one-quart of wheat only cost one-eighth of a denarius, so here we see that because of famine there is inflation of 800%! But in the midst of a famine of the basic staple of life we hear “**do not harm the oil and wine**” (v. 6). Oil and wine are comforts in life and during this famine they are in plentiful supply!

Wars, famines, disease, and death at the hands of animals—which was an Old Testament covenant curse (Lev. 26)—are part of God’s judgments on the earth: **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** (v. 8). This horse is **pale** because this is the color of death and disease. Everything you hear about, read about, and watch happening here and abroad are in the sovereign control of the Lord Jesus Christ. The application for us is that as we “see societies crumble and collapse, our response should not be terrified alarm, as though our security were bound up with a fragile human network of law and order, but anticipation and confidence: the Lamb is now on the throne, with God’s plan for history firmly in his hand.”³

But notice in this scene of judgment that’s God wrath is limited in scope. Only **a fourth of the earth** dies; that’s it. We’ll see with the trumpets and bowls that this increases. God is patient toward you, sinner. Will you repent of your sins and give your life to him?

³ Johnson, 122.

The Cry in Heaven: Seal 5 (vv. 9–11)

When Christ opens the fifth seal the scene shifts from the calamity on earth to *the cry in heaven*: **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** (v. 9).

Where are these **souls**? Notice that they are not generically in heaven but **under the altar**. In the Old Testament there were two altars: the altar of burnt offering in the courtyard of the tabernacle and temple and the altar of burnt incense inside the Holy Place just before the veil of the Holy of Holies. Those shadows and types have given way to their reality. There is one altar. Where is it? This is a scene of heaven, of the very presence of God himself. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord! (2 Cor. 5:8)

Why are these souls there? Because on earth they **had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne**.

What are they saying? We read in verse 10, **“O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”** This is not mindless revenge for revenge sake. This is a cry for God to vindicate in his justice his own name and his people’s witness. In response to their cry they are consoled with **a white robe** signifying their holiness in the presence of the Holy One and with the words **to rest a little longer**.

How long will this situation continue with the people of God dying for their faith and their crying out for vindication in heaven? It will continue **until the**

number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

What a scene of comfort! While the church on earth must endure in patience on earth the church in heaven experiences perfect peace. This is meant to comfort us on earth, beloved. As our Belgic Confession of Faith says in its last article, describing the Second Coming of Jesus and the final judgment of all humanity:

Therefore, with good reason the thought of this judgment is horrible and dreadful to wicked and evil people. But it is very pleasant and a great comfort to the righteous and elect, since their total redemption will then be accomplished. They will then receive the fruits of their labor and of the trouble they have suffered; their innocence will be openly recognized by all; and they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring on the evil ones who tyrannized, oppressed, and tormented them in this world. (BC, art. 37)

The Cataclysm at the End: Seal 6 (vv. 12–17)

Finally, at the opening of the sixth seal Christ reveals to us *the cataclysm at the end*. Listen to verses 12–14 and ask yourself, “When is this?”

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

When is that going to happen? If you go online and listen to my second sermon on Revelation you’ll remember that in chapters 6–22 there are seven main visions that parallel each other and describe the period from Christ’s first to his

Second Coming. And each of these seven sections climactically concludes with the Final Judgment. Verses 12–17 described the Second Coming of our Lord and his final judgment. This scene actually picks back up in 8:1–5, where we read again of “peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake” (8:5). And this judgment is again and again described at the end of chapters 11, 14, 16, 19, 20, and 21.

And when this Second Coming and final judgment happens, who will the Lord judge?

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, 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, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (vv. 15–17)

Did you notice in verses 12–14 how many cataclysmic calamities there will be at the Second Coming? There are seven. And here in verses 15–17 do you see how many groups these judgments come upon? Seven again. In fact, at the coming of the Lord there will be no more patience, no more judgment on just a **fourth** (v. 8), but **everyone** (v. 15) will stand before him! And before this worthy Lamb-Lion, **who can stand?** (v. 17) Now you understand why everyone is depicted as hiding. Now you understand why everyone thinks it better to be crushed by rocks than to appear before the Holy One.

Conclusion

History—the story of God’s patience and grace towards sinners but also his justice and wrath towards the unrepentant and unbelieving—is moving towards this goal, my friends. You can call it bunk, but this is happening right now and that end is coming. The question is, which side of this history will you be on? God calls you today to cry out to him for mercy and to trust in his Son, Jesus Christ, who alone can shield you from the coming wrath. As one hymn says,

At the cross of Jesus
pardon is complete:
love and justice mingle,
truth and mercy meet.
Though my sins condemn me
Jesus died instead:
there is full forgiveness
in the blood he shed.

Will you cry out to him? Will you come to him? Amen.