



I want to start today on a bit of a dark note. Be assured that I'm not trying to depress you. You will see shortly how this fits in with the book of Revelation. I would like for you to consider some of the darkest moments of human history.

We know that world history has been filled with wars. World War I was supposed to be the war that ended all wars. But just a few decades later we had World War II. WWII casualty statistics vary greatly, but estimates of the dead range from 50-70 million, making it the deadliest war ever.

Wars are terrible, but equally terrible is the devastation left by famine. Take China for example. The Great North China Famine of 1877-78 killed 9.5 to 13 million people. And starting in 1958 the Great Leap Forward famine in China left over 30 million dead. But it's not just China. During the 20th century, an estimated 70 million people died from famines across the world.

Wars and famines are terrible. But how about plagues? The Black Death was one of the deadliest pandemics in history. It peaked in Europe between 1348 and 1350. Most believe it was spread by black rats on merchant ships throughout the Mediterranean and Europe. It killed 30% to 60% of Europe's population, which amounts to about 100 million people!

Aren't you glad you came to church today? But this is part of the reality of our world. Wars, famines and plagues are still very real threats. As believers these things force us to ask some hard questions. How do we explain these things? How do we reconcile these things with our faith in a good and loving and righteous God?

There are basically two ways to answer that question. On the one hand, you can say God doesn't like these things. He'd like to stop these terrible tragedies from happening but either he can't or he won't (at least for now). For some reason God stands back and allows human depravity to kind of just run its course. He has nothing to do with these terrible events.

On the other hand, there are those who say God is in control over everything, even wars, famines and plagues. Yes, human depravity is seen in all of this, but somehow God uses even that to accomplish his own good purposes. Perhaps they quote from Dt. 32:39 where God says, *"There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand."*

How do **you** make sense out of all of this? Turn with me to Revelation 6. Today we come to what a lot of people feel is the exciting stuff in Revelation. We come to the opening of the seven seals, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, and the cataclysmic events of the end times like when the stars fall and the sky is split apart.

As we get into this chapter I think you'll see that it depicts events that are hardly something to look forward to. Let me give you some background. John is caught up to heaven in a Spirit-inspired vision. First he sees a throne, with One seated upon it. He's surrounded by 24 elders and four living creatures who worship him. In God's right hand is a scroll. This scroll contains God's program for the future; the things which must happen. But who is able to make these things happen? Only the one who is able to open the scroll. But no one is found worthy to do that until John sees a lamb. This slain lamb has conquered by shedding his blood. He's worthy to open the seals.

Before the scroll can be read, the seals must be broken. So in chapter 6 we read of the opening of the first six seals. Let's start by reading verses 1-8.

**"Then I saw when the Lamb broke one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, 'Come.' I looked, and behold, a white horse, and he who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. When He broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, 'Come.' And another, a red horse, went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that men would slay one another; and a great sword was given to him. When He broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, 'Come.' I looked, and behold, a black horse; and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard something like a voice in the center of the four living creatures saying, 'A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not damage the oil and the wine.' When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, 'Come.' I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death; and Hades was following with him Authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth."**

## The first four seals reveal four horsemen

The breaking of each of the first four seals follows the same pattern: the Lamb opens a seal, one of the four living creatures cries out, *"Come!"* and out comes a horse and rider.

The first four seals are presented together. You've heard of **The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse**; well, here they are. The first horseman rides a white horse. Because Jesus later appears on a white horse in chapter 19, some folks say this is Jesus. But I'm not so sure. The four horsemen probably should be understood as a whole; it's hard to see how Jesus fits with the other three. Not only that, Jesus already has a role in this vision, as the Lamb who opens the seals. And in chapter 19 Jesus carries a sword, not a bow. Notice it says he went out *"conquering to conquer."* I say this first horseman represents military conquest. The bow is a symbol of war, and the white horse points to victory or perhaps even an element of deception. He rides as an invader bent on conquest, and he's successful. The history of the world is all about conquest, one nation over another.

The second horseman is on a red horse, the color of blood. Blood flows freely, as he removes peace so that men kill each other. His large sword is symbolic of this slaughter. The first horseman brings death by external invasion and conquest; this second horseman brings death by internal civil war and violence.

The third horseman rides a black horse. He represents scarcity of food. The scales he holds are for measuring out food that people buy. A quart of wheat is enough to feed one person for a day. But it costs a denarius, which was a day's wage. If he chooses to eat cheaper and less nutritious food, he can buy enough barley for three people. The idea is that people have to spend all their money on mere subsistence. The only good thing is the olive trees and grape vines aren't destroyed, but who can afford them?

The color of the fourth horse is ashen, which was a kind of pale green—the sickly color of a corpse. His rider is Death and with him is Hades, the abode of the dead. They kill a quarter of the earth by sword, famine, plague and wild animals. But not everyone dies; just a quarter of the earth.

Now we have to ask the question, why does all of this happen? Has God lost control? Or is God in charge even of all this? There is a really important phrase in these verses that explains God's role in all of this. It's the little phrase *"it was given."* It's a key phrase in Revelation. A crown was given to the first horsemen. The removal of peace from the earth was given to the second along with a large sword. Authority to kill a quarter of the earth was given to the fourth. Who does the giving? This phrase is an indirect way of referring to God. Everything in this chapter begins with God, even judgment. Though human evil and choice are in play, God is still on his throne. We say, why doesn't he do something? But he is doing something. He's using sword, famine and plague to judge a world that's turned its back on him. The

good news is that all of this prepares the way for the Lord to return. This may bother us. If God is loving and kind, how could he do such damage? But if God isn't on his throne, if he's not in charge of everything, then this world is absurd.

Perhaps this is why Christians have debated over **when** these judgments occur. Are they past, present or future? There are three major opinions. One group believes that the judgments have all occurred in the past, either prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in A.D. 70, or prior to the Fall of Rome in 410. This is called the Preterist view. In this view, we don't have to worry about any of this happening to us.

Another group believes these judgments are all in the future during the Great Tribulation. The White Horse is believed to be the Antichrist. These are called Futurists. Futurists believe the church won't be around during this time because it's already been raptured up to heaven. The idea is that Christians couldn't possibly have to face these terrible judgments. This is the dominant view in America, the view held by the *Left Behind* series and *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

Finally, the last group views these judgments as typical of the entire time between the first and second comings of Christ. This is the Idealist view. The idea is that God is continually intervening in history, bringing judgment upon the world. Christians have to live through all of this. Even though we're not ourselves being judged, we're still part of this world and have to endure some of the consequences of living in a fallen world. As we'll see in a moment, we have an important role to play in all of this. As it pertains to this passage, this is my view.

Part of the reason I hold this view on this passage is Revelation 6 parallels what Jesus predicted would happen after his death. When the disciples asked him when the end would come, Jesus said, *"See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many. And you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs"* (Mt. 24:5-8). It's not hard to see the four horsemen reflected in what Jesus said will happen. But notice how careful he is to say these things are **not** signs of the end; these are *"the beginning of birth pangs."* All of these things have characterized the entire time between his two comings.

## The fifth seal reveals the martyrs

If this is true, what Jesus said next makes a lot of sense. He said, *"Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name"* (v.9). If you go back to Revelation 6 you can see how this lines up with the opening of the fifth seal.

“When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also” (verses 9–11).

In the Old Testament, when animals were sacrificed on the altar, the blood flowed down and was collected underneath. John sees under the altar the blood of the martyrs whose death is an offering to God. They’ve been killed because of *“the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.”* In the midst of all this they held fast to God’s word and the testimony of Jesus. Many died for doing so.

We wonder, why does he allow his people to be killed? Why doesn’t he prevent it or do something about it? That’s what these martyrs ask: “How long, O Lord? Why don’t you put things right? Why don’t you bring judgment on these people?”

God answers first by giving them white robes. These indicate that though they’re dead, they’re victorious in God’s sight. Then he tells them to rest a while, because a lot more believers have to be killed first. Again, this is what’s happening today. There are still places in the world where standing for Christ gets you killed. It’s very clear here that being a Christian doesn’t exempt you from tribulation. Most of the saints in Revelation end up killed. The only way to make sense of that is to see that death isn’t the worst thing that can happen to you.

In Revelation there are two deaths: the first death and the second death. Christians may be killed for their witness, but this is just the first death which brings them to heaven (20:5). The second death is the lake of fire and the place of eternal judgment and it has no power over them (20:6,14). It’s the second death rather than the first death that’s the ultimate tragedy. Too many people devote too much energy into avoiding or delaying the first death rather than the second death.

### **The sixth seal reveals the day of the Lord**

This brings us to the opening of the sixth seal. This seal brings us finally to the end of history as we know it. As we’ll see, in a way the sixth seal will be God’s answer to the prayer of the martyrs for justice.

**“I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when**

**shaken by a great wind. The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; 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?’” (verses 12–17).**

Once again, this parallels what Jesus said in Mt 24:29, *“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”* Now this is talking about the future! The end has finally come. If stars are falling from the sky, this is the end of the earth as we know it. This is the destruction of the cosmos. This is what the Old Testament called **The Day of the Lord**. Notice the reaction of those who don’t know Christ; kings, great men, commanders, the rich, the strong, slave and free. Are they repentant? No. They fear the wrath of the Lamb: “Oh, no! Who can stand?” But they seek physical death instead of seeking the mercy of the Lamb. They don’t repent. Their hearts are hard. They cry out to the rocks, “Fall on us! Kill us! We’d rather die than face the wrath of the Lamb!”

### **God’s sovereignty, judgment and call**

What does all this tell us? It tells us in his sovereignty over history, God pours judgment out on the world through war, famine and plagues, but in the midst of that he calls his people to stand for him at any cost. Let me break that down for you.

First of all, God is sovereign over history. I want to be careful here because it’s easy to become imbalanced. God doesn’t directly cause evil. Many of the terrible things we see in this chapter are the result of the depravity of people who in freedom have turned away from the Creator and Savior. God isn’t responsible for their sin and rebellion; they are. But what we must affirm from this passage is that none of this happens apart from God’s sovereign rule. While he doesn’t cause evil, he can and does use evil to accomplish his purposes. In this passage, he uses evil to judge evil. He is in control of everything.

R.C. Sproul likes to ask his students, “Is God in control of every single molecule in the universe?” Then he says, “The answer to that question will determine whether you really believe in God or not.” Most often his students don’t get it. So he says to them, “Don’t you realize that if there is one molecule on this universe running around loose outside the scope or the sphere of God’s divine control, authority and power, then that single maverick molecule may be the grain of sand that changes the entire course of human history, that blocks God from keeping the promises

he's made to his people?" That one maverick molecule could prevent Christ from establishing his kingdom. For if there is one maverick molecule, it would mean that God isn't sovereign. If God isn't sovereign, then God isn't God. If there is any element of the universe that's outside his authority, then he is no longer God over all.

If you understand and accept this, you can trust God in any and every circumstance. You may not like what's happening to you, you may not understand why God in his sovereignty has allowed it, but you can trust that he'll use it to accomplish his own good and gracious purpose in your life.

Second, God pours out judgment on the world. In this passage the slain lamb has become angry. The people of this earth who have rejected him are terrified by the wrath of the lamb. We don't like to talk about God's wrath. We much prefer to think of God as kind and loving and patient. He's all of those things, but he's also a God of justice. And without judgment, there is no justice.

Imagine sitting in a courtroom. One of your children has been murdered. The killer sits before you being tried for this crime. The evidence unmistakably points to him as the one who did it. How would you react if he was somehow freed without having to bear any responsibility for that terrible act? What kind of judge would allow that to happen? Certainly not a just judge. Justice requires there be punishment. On the other hand, how would you react if that killer was convicted and sentenced? You would feel relieved. You would feel that wrong has been righted. As early as the murder of Abel by the hand of Cain, God asked Abel, *"What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground"* (Gen. 4:10). Right here in this passage, the martyrs cry out, *"How long, O Lord...will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood?"* The answer to that question is, "Not forever. The day will come when I will avenge your blood."

Meanwhile, he offers a way out; a way for there to be both justice and forgiveness. God so loved the world that he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, the lamb of God, to be slain for our sins. God's justice was satisfied when he died in our place. His wrath was poured out on his Son. He offers each of us pardon based on his death. There is one way to avoid the wrath of the lamb and that is to repent and to accept the death of the lamb as payment for your sin.

Finally, God calls his people to stand firm. Go back to those martyrs. Go back to that little phrase: they were *"slain because of the*

*word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained"* (v.9). This is a theme we see throughout Revelation. We already learned John is exiled on Patmos *"because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus"* (1:9). Later in chapter 12 we hear of those who *"overcame because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death."* This word "testimony" literally means witness. We're called to be witnesses. Being a witness doesn't just mean you go around preaching. It means in all you do you stand for the fact that Jesus is Lord and that your salvation has been won through him. Often times that will get us in trouble with the world. But we have to love something even more than we love our own lives. Revelation encourages all of us to hold fast to the word and to stand firm on the testimony of Jesus to the very end.

This past Friday a dear brother in Christ whom I had known since high school passed away after a long fight with cancer. I heard the news as I was writing this sermon and I immediately realized he was an example of one who did this. As an unbelieving high school student I recall seeing his VW bug on campus a lot. He was there to get to know high school kids and eventually share the gospel with them. I knew why he was there and didn't want to have anything to do with it. But after I became a Christian and entered college I got to know him and he invited me to be a part of reaching out to high school kids on that same campus. He was a curious blend of outrageous humor and rock solid commitment to Christ. Paul had a new vision for ministry. He wanted to start a school where kids could learn to live out their faith. He was instrumental in starting a school that had an impact on all three of my kids: the King's Academy. He and his wife were the first example of a Christian marriage I ever saw. Later, his faith in the sovereignty of God was tested as his wife died of leukemia, leaving him with five children to raise. He remarried a wonderful Christian woman about five years ago but not long after started his own battle with cancer.

I tell you his story simply because I want you to know it's possible. Here is a man who trusted in God's sovereignty despite some very confusing circumstances. Here is a man who despite all that he went through did not love his life even unto death. He shows us that it's possible for us to be faithful to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus. That's what Revelation calls us to do. It calls us to stand firm despite the fact that all Hell is breaking loose around us. It calls us not to love our lives even to death.

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