

HOW LONG, O LORD?

Revelation 6:1-17

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Introduction

Last week, we celebrated and rejoiced with brothers and sisters from all over the world, indeed from all times, with the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us, who stand now around the throne of God, we celebrated the defeat of death with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. No doubt, a time of the year we look forward as we refocus on the person and work of Jesus Christ, all the while enjoying the coming of spring time. Right, we've come out finally of the cold, dark winter and with Easter we experience new birth and new life.

Except a lot of that is just illusion. Sometimes winter is still holding on; the days are still darker than we would like; and all our struggles and problems from before are still here. Yes, we've seen progress regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, but we've not entirely neutralized the threat. More than that the plagues of cancer, disease, and famine still run rampant through our world and will continue to do so. Things may seem a little calmer in our streets and in our governments, but the same threads of anxiety, hatred, and fear still capture the hearts and minds of the populace. Many of us still struggle to pay the bills; we have health issues and unexpected illnesses and injuries; we lose relationships, friendships, romantic or familial. In other words, the creation still groans awaiting peace to finally come. The world still isn't right.

(Sorry to be the buzzkill, this morning. You know, last week was the happy stuff; now we come back down to earth)

But despite how we may feel or what we may perceive, this tension and uneasiness isn't lost on God. For one, He isn't aloof to the affairs of the world just because He sits on His heavenly throne. Second, He isn't oblivious to our personal worries or concerns. And not only does He know these things, but He cares and He wants to address them! You see, as we turn this morning to a series of visions that accompany the breaking of the seals of the scroll, we

encounter a series of figures well-known in culture as the four horsemen of the apocalypse. And it's easy to quickly read this chapter in light of what we think we already know about their presence. But, like I've already said before, a lot of our task in reading Revelation involves unlearning what we've heard before about this book, and chapter six is a great example of this.

You see, let's just stop for a second and remember to whom this book is addressed. It's written to the seven churches of chapters 2 and 3. More than that, it's also written to believers of every generation. So just consider that for a second. What is revealed here is meant for Christians to understand and consider. Think about how the intended recipient shapes our understanding of the book. Often, Revelation is read as a play-by-play guide of how global events will play out. But think about it; what good would that kind of message be to 1st century Christians? Or 5th century Christians? Or 15th century Christians? Or even us today if the return of Christ were still 1,000 years away. In other words, this passage today, as well as those to follow, must address not only the very end of things, but our experiences along the way. These judgment moments must not be for just those in the future, but rather must convey something to us along the pilgrim's path.

What we'll find, not just today in chapter six but along the way as well, is that these visions are partially an explanation to us of why the world is the way it is. But much more so these visions are a simultaneous warning and encouragement to Christians. They create a literary, rhetorical, and emotional experience of shock and awe. And the point isn't to provoke fear, but to stir us to action and fidelity to Jesus.¹ In other words, and we'll repeat this point over and over again, the expressions of judgment to come from God are not final judgments cast upon

¹ Koester writes, "The principal purpose of the visions in Revelation 6 is to awaken a sense of uneasiness in readers by vividly identifying threats to their well-being," (Koester, *Revelation and the End of Things*, 81).

the earth, but penultimate activities. In other words, they are the actions of God that proceed the final return of Jesus.

If I could offer a not-so-great example I'd liken them to the way parents often warn their children before the final punishment comes down. I know this might surprise you, but in my household when it times for the kids to stop playing and go take showers before dinner, they "sometimes" whine and complain. And so, their mother and I very "patiently" and "gently" instruct them that if they cannot listen and obey then there will be consequences. We give them warnings, might even start to usher out small punishments, all done in the effort to encourage them to do what we've asked, to do what is right.

In what we're reading, these judgments throughout history are warnings, and they're warnings not primarily to the world, but to believers! 'Realize the effects of sin, both in the personal judgment it brings but also the destructive effect it has on the world. Wake up and cling to Christ!' That's what chapter six and the chapters to follow will tell us. Therefore, **As we survey the evil and oppressive forces and events of the world before us, around us, and in front of us, we must devote our full loyalty to the Lamb who still and forever reigns over all creation.**

1. Brokenness in the world must drive us to full allegiance to Christ v. 1-8

And so, when we look at these visions that accompany the breaking of the seals of the scrolls, a couple things I just want us to remember. First, these seals themselves do not convey the content of the scroll. Right, remember from chapter five that Jesus alone is worthy to open the scroll, but first He must break the seven seals. What will follow then are visions that John sees every time a new seal is broken. And the point of these visions is simply to help us understand the condition of the world. The scroll tells us how God is going to fix and redeem this world; the seals first show us the need.

Second, just as this letter was written to the seven first-century churches as representatives of Christian from all times and places, so too, these visions depict the brokenness of the world in the 1st century all the way to our day. In other words, these aren't specific one-time events, but rather depict all of human history, to show how the whole world is trapped in destruction and chaos. But while we see and experience these things we mustn't forget that, oh yeah, the Lamb who we met in chapter 5 is still sitting on the throne.² Don't be overcome by fear, don't despair, don't give in; Christ is still King and in control, even when it doesn't seem like it.

Overall, these visions and the horsemen depict the condition of the world since Genesis 3, a world of conquest, violence, economic hardship, and death.³ But these visions help us to see where we ought not to look for safety and security and where we should. The horsemen shatter the notion of finding true security in nation/empire, in economy, or in own health. True security is found only in the slaughtered Lamb. And so, **Understanding the brokenness of this world must drive us to full allegiance to Christ.**

Verses 1-8 depict these four horsemen, and the plagues they bring represent the deepest sins of humankind.⁴ The first rider comes on a white horse with a bow who goes out **“as a conqueror in order to conquer,” (Revelation 6:2).** This military imagery would have been well-known in ancient Roman society. You see, the most powerful bowmen of John's time were the

² Beale writes that this passage intended to show, “that Christ rules over an apparently chaotic world and that suffering does not occur indiscriminately or by chance,” (Beale, *Shorter Commentary*, 123).

³ Of note, commentators view the time of these events differently. Koester argues that they cannot be confined to one time period whereas Beale argues these events happen soon after the crucifixion and resurrection. Osborne argues that the sixth seal immediately precede the return of Christ. It is the position of this author to side with Koester and see the visions as both representing the first-century context, how the world continues to be in every generation, and how the measures will only get worse until the return of Christ.

⁴ Osborne writes, “The first four summarize the effects of total depravity, as the apocalyptic horsemen unleash the deepest sins of humankind: lust for conquest, civil war, famine, and pestilence/death,” (Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], 298).

Parthians on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire. They had fought back Roman expansion three times in the past 150 years, and so, their very existence and presence was a constant reminder of the limits of Roman power. Thus, the first horseman is a reminder that placing faith in the empire, and compromising one's faith to honor the emperor, was putting one's hopes in a false place.

The second rider is red and comes with a sword. The horseman symbolizes the threat of violence which happens within every society. This image was almost a spit in the face of the Empire which boasted of its *Pax Romana*. The Romans believed they had brought peace to the world, when in reality their entire society and its foundation was built upon blood and exploitation. This ironic picture of the propaganda of peace that is kept with the sword warns believers not to get complacent and assume all is fine and well. Appearances can be deceiving and so remain on your guard the second vision warns us.

The third rider rides a black horse and carries with him a set of scales. The scales are an economic symbol, as they were commonly used in trade and coin exchange. What he comes to do is to bring famine or economic devastation. And it's not the famine itself which is so deadly, but the rising prices of food and basic goods particularly affects the poor of society. In other words, this third horseman is a symbol of economic injustice and exploitation of human societies where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Whereas Rome prided itself on being able to make staples widely available (18:13), this vision is a reminder about the limits of any economic system, a reminder that should feel especially close to home in the U.S.

Finally the fourth rider comes on a pale green horse. His name is Death and Hades was following after him. He symbolizes no one particular threat, but of death itself, which is always looming around each of us. The question we ask in the face of death, and of all these conditions,

is ‘Where is God in all of this?’ Right, these horsemen are not sent by God; no, they simply come as the Lamb slowly breaks the seals of the scrolls. But, neither are they independent of God; they are not outside His sovereignty and providence.

And so, really, these horsemen represent the reality of living in a fallen world. They are what happens in a broken world, but they are also realities which God chooses to not yet resolve but use at times for His purposes. **The horsemen depict both the suffering that God’s people endure and the judgment that comes upon those who reject the kingship of Jesus.** And that’s all we see. We find quickly that chapter six, and the book as a whole, does not seek to explain where evil comes from or why God allows it. Rather, we’re simply shown that this world is the arena in which Satan operates and human sin wreaks havoc.

And let’s not forget the purpose of this lesson, to bring repentance and faith in the reader. Right, think about those churches like Sardis and Laodicea who were existing in a place of complacency. A series of visions like this were meant to unsettle them. Hopefully, it unsettles us! Yeah, I know we all have our challenges and struggles, and some of us really are going through some tough stuff, and so hopefully for you the reminder that Christ still reigns over the hardship gives you the incentive and power to persevere through your trials.

But the reality is that for the majority of us we’re not in that situation. We’re here in our nice clothes, in our comfy church building, we’ll drive home in our nice cars to our nice homes, go to work tomorrow. I mean it’s really easy for you to practice the kind of Christianity you do, because it requires very little of you and costs you nothing. And you don’t mean to get complacent or lukewarm, but you just haven’t taken the Lamb upon His throne as seriously as you ought. This world is harsh and this world kills, we’re shown. And there is no refuge to be

found anywhere within it. You're only hope of survival is with King Jesus. Flee from all the things you try to find comfort and security in and pledge yourself to Him!

2. True peace and security are found only in faithfulness to Christ v. 9-17

For as we see in verses 9-17, true peace and security are found only in faithfulness to Christ. As the fifth seal is opened the horsemen disappear and now we're looking back in the throne room at "the souls of those who had been slaughtered because of the word of God and the testimony they had given," (Revelation 6:9). We're looking at those who have been martyred throughout history. In verse 12, with the sixth seal we come back to earth and witness the specter of destruction and divine wrath that threatens all of humanity. It's really a jarring pair of scenes that challenge the ordinary perception of peace and security: the martyrs rest in heaven and the remainder of humanity is disturbed on earth.

I'll go into the two visions in a bit more depth but I want us to first consider the overall message which is that you can't remain neutral; you must align with one side. And whereas the death of the martyrs would suggest that one give up faith for earthly security, the reality is that the martyrs are the only ones to enjoy peace.

You in this fifth vision the emphasis is on the word of their testimony, meaning their loyalty to the confession of Christ. Gordon Fee argues, "In John's view this is the essence of what had led, and would continue to lead, to martyrdom—the insistence on the part of believers that the crucified, now risen Jesus is Lord, the only Lord, and thus not the emperor, who as a mere earthling would dare to assume such a title for himself," (Gordon Fee).⁵ The martyrs cry out, "How long until you judge those who live on the earth and avenge our blood?" (Revelation

⁵ Fee, *Revelation*, 87.

6:10). In other words, they cry out for justice. They ask, ‘How long, O Lord, must this suffering and evil be allowed to persist?’

God’s first response is to give them white robes and assurance that their life and death advanced God’s purposes for the world. Their death and suffering are not in vain, but under His sovereign control. But next there’s a warning that more martyrdom will come, without any indication yet as to why. I mean, we won’t see until chapter 11 that the witnesses’ death is what leads others to repent and give glory to God. We don’t see here yet, as Grant Osborne puts it, that “Martyrdom is the final victory over Satan and a great privilege in sharing the ‘messianic woes’ of Jesus,” (Grant R. Osborne).⁶ We don’t know right now why God allows the suffering of His people, and that’s not the purpose of the fifth vision. To ask that question is to miss the point. The point is exactly the same that the Apostle Paul makes, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us,” (Romans 8:18). In other words, despite everything we may think and feel and experience in this life, true, everlasting peace and security is found only in Christ.

That’s why the sixth vision then jumps back down to the earth, where, get this, the earth itself breaks open to mourn over these events. Creation itself rises up to condemn the wickedness of humankind. What we have here is both the heavens and the earth declaring the glory of God and condemning the wickedness of sin. However advanced and enlightened a society may believe themselves to be, whatever narrative of salvation and prosperity they tell, it’s all falsehood and folly. Stop looking for your happiness, your security, your ideal of “the good life”

⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, 298-99. Fee then adds, “[E]ven though John’s ultimate concern in this book is to reassure his readers of their final destiny, despite present and anticipated increased suffering, he neither downplays nor enhances the latter reality. They are, after all, followers of the Crucified One, whose own death was at the hands of the Empire, even though it had been instigated by the fear and hatred of the very people he came to deliver,” (Fee, *Revelation*, 99).

in the mechanisms, institutions, and idols of this world. For these first-century readers, stop looking to Rome, to her economy and cultural rituals, to societal acceptance, and physical peace. You won't find anything but suffering and judgment there. For today's American twenty-first century readers, stop looking to your house and your car, your follows and mentions, your Instagram façades, your career or your children's "accomplishments". You won't find joy and acceptance and peace anywhere in there but rather the judgment of a holy and righteous God against your idolatry.⁷

Naturally, therefore, the vision closes by asking "Who is able to stand?" (Revelation 6:17). Chapter seven will answer and so you'll have to come back next week for that. For now, let's just consider the two responses to God we see in the second half of chapter six. On the earth, those who have rejected God despair in hopelessness and hide. It's the same action we see in Genesis 3. Overcome with shame and fear, Adam and Eve flee from the sound of God's coming presence. They know there is none who can stand His wrath. Likewise, the sinner flees into the caves at the coming of God's presence knowing there is seemingly none who is able to stand.

The martyrs, however, believers both in the heavens and we who spiritually fellowship and identify with them, stand before God and cry out for His justice and will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. In other words, their love and concern are still not even with their own lives but with the righteousness and glory of God filling the earth.

⁷ Koester writes, "The vision challenges the idea that readers might attain a kind of security by compromising their faith in order to blend into the beliefs of the general populace, as some of those addressed by Revelation were inclined to do," (Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 88).

And the one who is concerned with self-preservation collapses under the wrath of God and the Lamb. The one who loves the Word of God and embodies it with their lives receive everlasting peace, security, and exaltation with the slaughtered Lamb.

What is your love, dear friend? You see, the book of Revelation doesn't call us all to martyrdom. That's not God's will for everyone. But we are called to identify ourselves with the slaughtered Lamb and those who suffer on His behalf. We are to take stock and inventory of our lives, of our affections, and genuinely ask which camp they point to: the saints in heaven or the sinners on earth. We're all in the latter party; that's the amazing grace and power of the Cross. It has "rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son," (Colossians 1:13). And so, we're reminded, warned even, of the eternal importance of living like citizens of the Kingdom of God not the kingdom of this world.

As you survey the brokenness, chaos, sadness, and death of this world, do you understand how those things have lived within you and how you would still gladly embrace them if not for the divine and supernatural intervention of God in your life? Are you laboring each and every day to put those things further and further to death? And in the despair that comes to us all amidst the pain and suffering of living in a fallen world, where do you cast your eyes for hope, for deliverance, for salvation? We continue to stand today with the great cloud of witnesses and ask, 'How long, O Lord?' His answer is to clothe us in the righteousness and peace of Jesus Christ.