

## The Judgements Come

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Revelation 6:1-17

Up until this point in the book of Revelation the message has been quite positive, with beautiful images of worship in the previous chapters. But now, we come to some fearful images and the message of judgement. As the seven seals are opened by Jesus Christ, the Lamb, images of white, red, black and green horses bringing destruction are revealed. Peace is taken away; people experience terrible hardship. Not only that, by the end of the chapter we read there's a great earthquake, the sun becomes black, the moon becomes like blood, and the stars fall to the earth! At this point in my reading I was feeling like maybe it would have been better to not open those seven seals! But, these terrible images are actually symbols showing the reality of hardships that humanity has already experienced, and will continue to experience until the end of time. They are also a sign of God's judgement on evil, the natural consequence of sin.

Please keep in mind that scholars are divided on how to interpret much of the book of Revelation, so from other people you may hear other ideas as to how to understand this book. For some passages, there can be more than one valid interpretation. Much of the details in today's message come from my studies with the "Believer's Church Bible Commentary." To me, the perspective given through this commentary makes more sense than many of the explanations found in other commentaries and YouTube videos.

Chapters four and five give an image of the joy the righteous experience with God in heaven, while chapter six moves to the focus on judgement of the wicked on the earth. It's a warning for the righteous people to not compromise their faith, and it's an encouragement for the wicked to repent. But, how shall we interpret these judgements? Literally? That would be tough. The stars are much bigger than the earth so how could they all fall onto the earth as it says in verse 13? Or, how could the sky roll up or split apart like we read in verse 14? We now know that stars aren't fastened up high, ready to fall on us if they stop sticking. And these days, we know the sky is made of gasses, not something solid that can be rolled up... These images come from an ancient understanding of the world. They are wild images used to describe important spiritual realities. Some think the literal interpretation of the Bible is a more faithful way to understand it. But, the biblical writers themselves didn't always interpret things literally. For example, talking about Pentecost, (where the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples), the Apostle Peter says, "...the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood..." This likely didn't happen at that time! The images were more symbolic of spiritual things that were happening.

Let's take a look at what happens when Christ opens the seven seals. We have a lot of symbols to look at today! When the first seal is opened, one of the four creatures near the throne calls out "Come!" The same word could also be "Go!" which actually may fit better since the sense is that of horsemen being sent to cause problems on earth. A white horse is the first to appear. There are three main possible understandings here. Some believe that the rider is the "antichrist," the demonic enemy of Christ who pretends to be him. With this interpretation, the white could symbolize "the look of purity." But, this interpretation doesn't fit well with the other symbols and horses.

Another possible interpretation is that the rider of the white horse is Christ himself, proclaiming the gospel. But, it's strange if Christ opens the seal, and then calls himself to "Come!" The other three horses represent tribulations and hardship. So, the positive image of Christ here wouldn't fit well with the others. And, maybe most problematic of all is the fact that the white horse and rider come out ready to conquer with violence. This doesn't fit with the

reality that Jesus Christ is revealed as the slaughtered Lamb of God, the one who died on the cross for our sins. Jesus' way was one of non-violence. Instead of fighting he was obedient to the way of God, allowing himself to be sacrificed. He conquered evil through non-violent obedience and the power of sacrificial love. It doesn't fit that he would suddenly turn around and follow the way of violence now.

The most likely interpretation seems to be that the white horse and rider represent war. Military leaders would often ride a white horse into battle. The bow, here, is a traditional weapon of war, and the crown would be the symbol of military victory. White could also be a symbol of victory. So, if we conclude that this horse is an image of war, it connects well with the other three horses, each of which reflect the devastating effects of war.

Christ opens the second seal and a horse appears, "red as fire." Red could be a symbol of the Devil, and a symbol of bloodshed. The sword mentioned here could represent conflict or strife between people. This rider would be "permitted to take peace from the earth so that people would slaughter one another." The war of the white horse leads to the red horse's strife between people. Note that it says Christ "permitted" the rider to take peace from the earth. This wasn't approved by Christ, but instead permitted. Evil does not come from Christ or God, but instead it is sometimes allowed. Many of these judgements could be the natural consequences of sin. I'll say a bit more about the meaning of this judgement, later.

The third seal produces a black horse. The colour black is associated with mourning. This horse brings famine, likely the result of the war and strife brought with the first two horses. Often, during a war all the focus is on money and energy to support the war. Because of this, basic needs are neglected and the economy suffers. The rider carries scales, which would have been used to measure grain. The symbol is one of scarcity. A day's pay for a quart of wheat (or a normal day's ration). Normally a day's pay could buy 12 times as much.

The fourth horse has a rider named "Death." The horse is a pale green, possibly like the colour of a rotting corpse. Hades follows along. At that time, Hades was believed to be the name of a kingdom of the dead, the underworld, or the grave. This horse and rider had authority to kill with the power of the sword, famine, sickness, and wild animals. These were all common ways for people to die. Note that this horse and rider was given authority over  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the earth. This is likely not a literal  $\frac{1}{4}$ , but I believe it is significant. It could actually reflect the mercy of God. These judgements and tribulations are not the end. The violence is not on everyone. It's limited. And, no matter how much war, suffering, and death happens, God's mercy is there for those who endure the suffering.

The fifth seal doesn't produce a horse, but instead there is an image of martyrs who have been killed. Their souls are seen, under the altar. In Jerusalem, as part of worship, animals were sacrificed on an altar. The blood of the animals ran down the sides and was caught in an area underneath the altar. The blood was important, and thought to contain the life of the animal. Here, the image of the martyrs is compared with the animal sacrifices offered to God. By being martyred on earth, they became like an offering in God's temple in heaven. The martyrs cry out, "How long before you avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" Their cry is likely not so much for vengeance as it is for God to deliver or save. They are concerned not for themselves, but for others who may be persecuted in the future. This deliverance can only happen when injustice is punished. The focus here is likely not on all the inhabitants of the world, but on the wicked, those who are loving the world instead of God.

The martyrs are given white robes – a symbol of heaven, and told to "rest a little longer until the number [coming into heaven] would be complete." Some believe this number to be a literal

144,000 as mentioned in the following chapter, but it's strange to think that heaven is limited to that number. Revelation 7:9, talks about a "great multitude that no one can count." So, this number also could be understood as symbolic. The point is that there will be more persecution happening before the end comes. It's even possible that through the suffering of martyrs, God is overcoming evil, just like God overcame evil through the suffering of Jesus on the cross. This is an area I'd like to study more deeply sometime. It's tough to understand suffering!

Now, we get to the last seal in this chapter. When the sixth seal is opened there is a great earthquake. Earthquakes were thought to be a sign of the end times. Old Testament prophets would talk of similar images when describing the end of the world – the sun becoming black, a full moon like blood, stars falling, the sky vanishing. The point here is that even the most stable things are only temporary. The destruction here follows the same order as the creation story in Genesis – first the earth, then the sun, the moon, the stars, the sky, mountains, and then the islands. All of creation is undone by this great earthquake. God's purpose in all of these judgements is to stop injustice, and right all wrongs through Christ, the Lamb. No one can stand against this. God is already doing this today. Our lives are often shaken up, although we're thankful that we are not experiencing war, like so many others in the world. Someday, there will be an end to the world, and Christ will renew everything.

So, how do we look at all these symbols? There are three main ways that people have interpreted them. Some people see them as reflecting the past, people and events in biblical times. For example, they may see the red horse as representing the bloodshed of Roman oppression. Another popular way to interpret the symbols is to think of them as representing things in the present and future. For example, some thought the white horse may have represented an antichrist-like figure like Hitler, or another cruel dictator. Some believe that this pandemic we're experiencing is a sign of the end. But, cruel dictators come and go, and there have been terrible plagues throughout history. People would have to keep changing what they think the symbols represent. The third way to understand these symbols seems to make the most sense to me. In this view, they represent timeless realities. Wars, strife, famine, economic disaster, and death have been happening throughout history, and they will likely continue to happen until the end of time. Whatever situation we face, we can trust that God cares about us and gives us strength.

It's difficult to understand why there is evil in the world, but much of it is connected with human sin, and freewill. In the book of Revelation, the understanding is that all power comes from God, but people misuse this power, and cause wars, strife, famine, and death. I like how commentator John Yeatts puts it. "But God turns this misuse of power into righteous judgement for breaking the laws of justice built into the created universe." The wars and tribulations could be seen as the natural, built-in, consequences of the sins of humanity... Looking at it this way, we can see how the Revelation account of God's judgement is in fact an encouragement for believers to remain faithful whenever persecution and hardship happens, and it is an encouragement for those who have strayed to return. God's justice happens in the end. It's clear, though, that if God's ways are not taken seriously, the natural consequences are devastating. Let's pray.

O Lord, the book of Revelation presents us with some very fearful images. It's not easy to understand what they all mean. Yet, we thank you that you are just, that you make things right. May we live faithfully, not with fear, but with trust in you. Lord, there have always been people suffering because of war, strife, famine, and sickness, all over the world. Give strength to those who suffer, and when we face hardship, may we look to you with hope. Thank-you that any

suffering we encounter is only temporary, that you are ultimately in control. May we follow the way of faithful obedience to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.