

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST: THE VICTOR

The Seals of Judgment

Revelation 6

Mark Vroegop

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!" 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. When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" 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. 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. 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!" When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" 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. 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. 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?" 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. 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. 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?" (Rev. 6, ESV).

After I graduated from college, I discovered a book that many of you probably also read. It isn't a Christian book, but I found a number of things in it to be helpful. The book is *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey. It's sage-like advice gave me some categories that proved to be instructive and transformative. The seven habits attempted to provide a framework of principled living:

1. Be Proactive
2. Begin with the End in Mind

3. Put First Things First
4. Think Win-Win
5. Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood
6. Synergize
7. Sharpen the Saw

As I was studying Revelation 6, I kept thinking about habit two—Begin with the End in Mind. According to Covey, this habit involves understanding the end result—knowing where you’re headed. It means to begin each day, task, or project with a clear vision for your direction or destination.¹

As helpful as that is, you need to know that’s not a new idea. From a Christian perspective, it’s why Revelation is in the Bible. The book’s aim is to highlight the arc of human history. It desires to show us where life is headed. Revelation invites us to not just begin with the end in mind, but to **live with the end in mind**. Remember that this book is written in order to fuel perseverance. This last book of the Bible is meant to give us hope so that we can make it.

If you read Revelation correctly, you should feel emboldened and strengthened. The book isn’t mainly about information. It’s not just about the future. John records this imaginative vision for the purpose of helping Christians make it to the end. In other words, what you see in this text should help you live faithfully in the week to come.

Revelation 6 shows us three realities to remember so we can live with the end in mind:

1. God is going to judge the world.
2. Christians are going to suffer.
3. The world is going to fall apart.

Let’s look at each of these.

1. Divine Judgment – God is going to judge the world (vv. 1-8).

In verses 1-8 we find what is often referred to as the four horsemen of the apocalypse. As the seven seals are opened, the first four seals are warriors who bring divine judgment. If you were here last week as we looked at Revelation 5, hopefully you remember that the plan of God involves deliverance through judgment. The saving of people and the redemption of the created order are a conquest.

When we studied the seven letters, each of them concluded with a statement of blessing for “the one who conquers.” This orientation is important. Revelation is about a cosmic battle, which is happening and will intensify in the future. That’s why the first four seals are horsemen. Take note that they are not cows, oxen, donkeys, or lambs. Horses and warfare are linked together. And in this instance, these horsemen are part of divine judgment. Some theologians take Revelation 6 to mark the beginning of the

¹ <https://www.franklincovey.com/habit-2/>

great tribulation. Some take it to mean a more generalized description of the world. Others take it to be a description that is true now but continues to intensify as the return of Christ draws near.

Remember the slain Lamb in chapter 5? After he took the scroll, spontaneous worship rippled out of the throne room. After he took the scroll, he began to open the seven seals. Don't forget that the Lamb is not only worthy to open the scroll but also to open the seals of judgment. Jesus is not only the Savior of the world, but he's also the King. He died, rose from the dead, and he's coming back. He inaugurated redemption, but it's not yet complete. He paid for sin, but his work isn't finished until sin is defeated and banished.

According to verse 1, after the Lamb opens the first seal, one of the living creatures around the throne issues a command like thunder: "Come!" This will be repeated with each of the opened seals. What's the message? It's designed for us to understand that the coming judgment is commanded from the throne room of heaven.

The first seal reveals a white horse with a rider who possesses a bow and wears a crown. Additionally, his activity is described as "coming out conquering and to conquer" (v. 2). It would seem that this first seal connects with Matthew 24:4-5, with the prophesy about those who will be imposters of Jesus. This rider looks similar to what we find in Revelation 19, but this doesn't seem to be the same image, especially since the rider is named "Faithful and True" in Revelation 19. But this is a false messiah, and with this comes a warning. James Hamilton says it really well:

" . . .those who do not know the divine Messiah, Jesus, will easily be led astray by false human messiahs. Some lyrical orator with passion and poise and style will come along. . .and all the sheep believe his promise to bring in the millennium. This is not new to the present political situation. These messianic pretenders have been followed around the world through the ages. God reveals this through Christ's opening the seal and having John record the vision so that God's people will not be duped by the fakes. Jesus is coming. He is our Messiah. He alone will bring in the kingdom, and his realm is our home. Followers of the Messiah Jesus do not worship the gods of this culture and do not follow the messiahs of this culture."²

Living with the end in mind means understanding this warning. To be careful that our passion for Jesus—the true Savior—is greater than our passion for any person who promises to save us from earthly concerns. The deception of the enemy is not to convince you that someone else died on the cross. It's to convince you that what you really need is something Jesus can't provide.

The second horse arrives the same way in verse 3. The seal is opened. The second creature issues the command to "Come!" This horse is red. It's a sign of the judgment of war, similar to what we find in

² James M. Hamilton Jr., [*Preaching the Word: Revelation—The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*](#), ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 178.

Matthew 24:6 where there are “wars and rumors of war.” Revelation highlights that there is a raging war all around us—both physical and spiritual. Eugene Peterson writes:

“The basic nature of history is warfare. Persons who live by faith live in conflict. History is a long sequence of battles—the forces of good and evil in pitched conflict. Sensitive persons know this. Artists know this. Students of history lay bare the documenting sources. People of prayer are in the middle of it even when the guns are silent. The battle rages within the soul; it is fought out in family circles; it is contested between nations. War is the human condition. To be human is to be at war.”³

The third horse is black with a pair of scales in his hand (v. 5). This judgment represents famine. We see this in light of the proclamation in verse 6 where prices are drastically inflated. But notice oil and wine are not affected. Many commentators suggest that this shows an increasing gap between the poor and wealthy. All of this is common when war breaks out. People follow leaders with religious fervor. Wars break out. The economy is devastated. It has happened over and over throughout human history.

The fourth horse is a pale horse (yellowish green), and the rider is named Death (v. 7). Trailing behind the horse is Hades, a reference to the grave or the realm of the dead. The world population is devastated by death through war, famine, pandemics, and wild beasts.

War, famine, and pandemics. It’s fascinating how differently I read that description in 2022 than how I would have read it in 2012 or 1992 or 1982. But it really shouldn’t be surprising if we look at the course of human history. These divine judgments are regular reminders that we live in a broken world. Romans 1 tells us that the judgment of God has already begun. So, we ought not be overly surprised when the effects of sin show up in our lifetime. If Jesus really is our king and our citizenship is in heaven, we should live soberly while not making everything about our lives revolve around this life. Some of us need to stop being surprised by the brokenness of the world. And some of us need to stop making this world our emotional home.

Matthew 24:8 tells us that these are just the beginning of birth pains. They are the traumatic events that will lead to a new kingdom. Regardless of your view of the rapture, the great tribulation, and the millennial kingdom, we should expect our earthly existence to be a rollercoaster of the effects of sin. And we should expect it to get worse.

Living with the end in mind, however, doesn’t mean running for the hills. It means running to Jesus who is our King and deliverer. The one who will save us from ultimate judgment. Living with the end in mind means understanding that we presently live in a world under the judgment of God. And that helps us know how to make it.

³ Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*, (New York: Harper One, 1988), 74.

2. Suffering Saints – Christians are going to suffer (vv. 9-11).

The second reality that we see in this text is the suffering of God’s people. We hear saints who lament the injustice inflicted upon them. They long and cry out for divine justice to be brought to bear. There are important lessons to learn here as well, regardless of when you believe this takes place in your eschatology.

According to verse 9, the fifth seal is opened, but we do not find a horse of judgment. Instead, John tells us about believers who had been killed “for the word of God and the witness they had borne” (v. 9b). This should sound familiar. First, John opened this book with a very helpful description of himself:

I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 1:9).

Perhaps you also remember the charge given to the church at Smyrna to “be faithful unto death” (2:10). This is what that command had in mind. Here is a collection of people who have given their lives for Christ. They are martyrs.

What follows is most important. We hear their prayer and a response. Their prayer is a lament, and it’s loud (v. 10): “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” These martyrs are pleading with God to bring justice to those who killed them. Take note that they are not enacting their own justice. Rather, they are relying on God to do that. At the same time, it is important to see that they long for justice—and they should! There’s nothing un-Christian about wanting all the wrong of the world to be set right. These martyrs are calling upon God to act because righteous judgment is part of God’s redemptive plan. But it also validates the sacrifice of those who have given their lives.

Being a Christian means living with the tension of not seeking your own vengeance or revenge. How do you do this? By living with the end in mind. It’s good to be reminded of the words of 1 Peter:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly (1 Pet. 2:23).

Notice, however, God’s response. The martyrs are not ignored. Instead, they are given white robes and told to rest a little longer. The white robes are symbols of their purity and their “conquering” status (see also 3:4-5; 7:9). There may be some kind of reward in view here.

But probably the most important statement comes at the end of verse 11: “. . .until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.” Take note of the fact that there is a divinely appointed number of people who will give their lives for the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Their martyrdom isn’t accidental; it’s part of a divine plan.

God ordained the number of people whose lives were to be given for the sake of the gospel. Their suffering and death are part of God's good plan. Divine justice is coming but not until the last sufferer crosses the finish line.

Living with the end in mind means that we understand that suffering and hardship—even death—are part of the calling of Christians because we are living for another kingdom. But even more, it's part of God's plan. There is no accidental or pointless suffering. It's all part of God's plan.

To make it to the end, we need to keep this in mind.

3. Human Frailty – The world is going to fall apart (vv. 12-16).

The final seal shows us the shaking of the entire created order. In other words, it shows us what happens as the world falls apart or comes apart at the seams.

Verse 12 highlights the sixth seal which results in cosmic disturbances. The earth and the sky convulse. The ground on which we stand and the space above our heads shows signs of collapse. A great earthquake leads the next judgment. The sun turns black and the moon like blood. In verse 13 we find that the stars begin falling to earth. Verse 14 warns us that the sky vanished like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Beyond the specific descriptions, the big picture is what you can't miss. The world is falling apart. The things that are foundational to our world are changing in ways that would be frightening. The sun, the moon, earth, sky, stars, mountains, and islands are all reeling under divine judgment. The things we take for granted and the things we derive confidence and predictability from are failing.

Everything is crumbling. People are rightly afraid. In verses 15-16, we get the sense of the panic that takes over the human race. Kings, great ones, generals, the rich, and the powerful no longer feel in control. Their earthly might or their financial wealth have no ability to protect them. The text expands to include "everyone—slave and free." Social, political, and economic categories no longer matter. Anything that made them different is now gone.

In fact, everyone is now in the same position. They are hiding in caves and rocks from the judgment of King Jesus. They even call on the rocks to hide them. But from what? Revelation 6 concludes with a powerful statement. The world is not just hiding from natural disasters or cosmic disturbances. As frightening as those are, they are not the point. Verses 16b-17 deliver the sober warning:

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? (Rev. 2:16-17).

It's a rhetorical question. The answer, of course, is "no one is able to stand." And that's the point of this entire chapter about the seals of judgment: nobody stands when you're on the wrong side of the Lamb.

So, what how do we think about this text? Let me address non-Christians and Christians.

If you are not yet a Christian, this text provides a gracious warning about what's coming so that you can live with the end in mind. This chapter might help you understand that the world is really broken. Sin has affected everything—even you. There's coming a day when the final judgment of God will come. You can hear whispers of it now. Everything wrong is going to be made right because Jesus is going to return. But when he comes, it will be as a regal judge. Friend, you don't want to be on the wrong side of God's holiness. There's an opportunity today to turn to Jesus. Please don't wait. Turn from your sins and put your trust in Jesus today.

To those of you who are Christians, this text is primarily addressed to you. It's designed to help you understand what's going on and what's going to happen.

- **God is going to judge the world.** So, be bold in your evangelism because there's no plan B for salvation. In your personal relationships, don't allow bitterness or revenge to be a part of your life. Entrust yourself to the courtroom of heaven.
- **Christians are going to suffer.** Some of us would do well to stop spending emotional energy on being surprised that life is hard. And others of us need to reckon with the fact that people have to know you are a Christian in order for you to suffer as a Christian.
- **The world is going to fall apart.** We need to watch out for false allegiances that take emotional and spiritual priority over Jesus. We need to be mindful that we shouldn't be placing our hopes in earthly leaders, rulers, systems, and nations. The world is so broken because of the presence of sin that we need deliverance that only Jesus can bring.

Revelation 6 starts to unfold what the end will look like. And it's helpful because it fuels endurance and perseverance as we live with the end in mind.

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