

On Heaven and Earth
Revelation 6
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First Baptist Church of Diana, March 16, 2011

Revelation 6 serves as a dividing line among interpreters. For dispensationalists, chapter 6 marks the beginning of the tribulation period and contains the record of events in heaven unfolding simultaneously with events on earth. Historical premillennialist see a historical account of some things past as well as some things future including events of the great tribulation. Dispensationalists have typically identified the four horsemen in Revelation 6 as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Warren Weirsbe sees an outline of the next 14 chapters of Revelation as the first 3 ½ years of the great tribulation (6-9), the events at the middle period of the tribulation (10-14), and the last 3 ½ years (15-19).

Bible students typically agree that the breaking of the seven seals represent God's judgment on sin. Historical premillennialists often see the breaking of the first four seals as "preliminary judgments representing forces operative throughout history by means of which the redemptive and judicial purposes of God are being carried out prior to the end.ⁱ One should bear in mind that the events surrounding the breaking of the seals do not represent the contents of the scroll. These are preliminary events making preparation for the events that spring from the contents. Newport argues the seals represent the characteristics events that must take place prior to the final stages of the kingdom.ⁱⁱ

John's vision of the horsemen closely parallels the vision of Zechariah of the Old Testament in terms of imagery and form. The horses are of different colors and in Zechariah they patrol the earth. In Revelation, the horsemen release great disasters. While there are parallels of the visions, Revelation 6 clearly corresponds to the eschatological discourses of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels, that is, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In these Gospels, the writers quote Jesus concerning wars, nations rising against nations, great earthquakes, famines, pestilences, great signs from heaven, and persecution.ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus spoke of the beginning of birth pains and these events precede the coming kingdom.

The First Seal

Verse one of chapter 6 pictures the lamb breaking the seals. One of the four living creatures says "come" which many have interpreted as an invitation extended to John to witness the events at hand. Others see it as an invitation to the horsemen. The language in the Greek is not nearly as clear as some have led to believe. The identification of the white horse is just as ambiguous as is a clear understanding of the invitation. This chapter and in particular verse three, are among the most debated verses in the entire Bible. The question so often debated concerns the identification of the rider of the white horse. Of our concern between the dispensational and historical interpretations, we find various interpretations on both sides of the question. Newport, from a historical perspective, argues that the rider is the dynamic proclamation of the conquering Gospel throughout all of history. From a dispensational approach, Hal Lindsay sees the rider of the white horse as a European antichrist who will head the Common Market from the city of Rome. Through the centuries many have interpreted the rider to be Christ. This persuasion likely traces its roots to the late second century and Irenaeus. His argument was based heavily upon a

correlation to Revelation 19:11 where we again meet a white horse and rider. This rider seems to be clearly identified as Christ. The differences in the rider of chapter 19 and the actions of the rider in chapter 6 are significant enough to rule out this possibility. The most plausible explanation seems to be contrary to Weirsbe and Lindsay while in agreement with Newport. The Gospel is conquering and has been conquering and will be conquering until the return of Christ. This view sees each of the first four seals as describing ongoing events rather than futuristic phenomenon.

The Second Seal

The red horse of verses 3-4 represents war. Peace is taken away and men kill each other. The sword given to the rider is the Roman short sword which constituted a battle of hand to hand combat resulting in much bloodshed. Weirsbe, believing the rider of the white horse to be the antichrist, sees an exchange of the bow without arrows of verse 2 for a sword to fight in verse 4. He also points out the historical record of war and bloodshed dating back to Cain and Able of Genesis. Hal Lindsay correlates the red horse to Russia and the war to the battle of Armageddon described in Revelation 16. While there is general agreement that the red horse represents war, the specifics have been widely debated. If the four horsemen are taken in manner to require consistent interpretation, one would likely see this as a reminder that war is a part of the fallen creation. That does not prevent the Lord from being in sovereign control and can even serve to encourage believers that God is in control and will bring this earth to an end in His time which is perfect and proper.

The Third Seal

At the breaking of the third seal, a black horse emerges and the rider carries a pair of scales. Black typically represents famine which logically follows war. The devastating wars of our own time period bare out this witness. War often results in what we call refugees who have difficulty finding anything to eat. The scales in the hands of the rider represent required barter for food whether it be on a cash system or an exchange of goods. Shortages of food caused by war result in escalate food prices and the greatest of wars cause the greatest of shortages. Oil and wine were made from a tree and a vine which seem to place limits on the amount of destruction God allows man to bring upon the creation. Some interpreters see in this verse a famine of the greatest proportions ever known to man which will come during the great tribulation time.

The Fourth Seal

The rider of the horse emerging with the breaking of the fifth seal is identified as death. The horse is an ashen color or a gray and Hades followed their path. According to Revelation 10:13, Hades contains the souls of the dead. The pestilence of the first three horsemen are coupled with all calamities and the natural conditions since the fall of man which results in death. The pronouncement of power over only one-fourth of the earth proclaims the continued sovereignty of God and the limits he places on the way in which men kill one another. In the final analysis, more people die from causes other than murder and war.

It is best to keep a view toward these horsemen that encompasses them in an aggregate manner. Over analysis can cause us to miss the dramatic imagery involved in apocalyptic literature. This illumination of history is brought to us with powerful symbols that reveal God's

sovereign control and shows us that certain elements of history are allowed by the Lord as necessary based on man's fallen condition and God's ultimate purpose of redemption.

The Fifth Seal

The opening of the fifth seal in verses 9-11 represents a change of focus. The first five seals were opened in heaven but the scene of events was on earth. The fifth seal reveals events in heaven. John must have been taken aback as he saw a vision of the many souls of all Christendom who had been martyred for the faith. Here they were all gathered at an altar which is a place of worship. These had maintained a good testimony and had been faithful in their proclamation of the Gospel. Weirsbé identifies these martyrs as coming from the first part of the tribulation and believes the language of verse 10 indicates their murders are still living on the earth. Mounce, from a historical position sees these martyrs as those who have been killed for their faith from all generations of Christians. He does not view verse 10 as demanding all of their murders to be yet alive on the earth.

The cry coming from the saints is not one antithetical to Christ's will. We know that God wants everyone to be saved and Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of his accusers. Even so, they are praying in accordance with God's will. God will judge sin and the end will come. His vengeance will come against sin and these prayers represent that fact. Surely anyone who understands the depth of evil and its consequences on earth would cry out for the Lord to swiftly move the earth to the next step on God's timetable and eliminate once and for all Satan's little party on earth.

This scene is completed with these martyrs receiving a robe of white and being encouraged to rest. This rest sometimes happens as we pray as well. In the midst of our crying out to God, he sometimes answers our prayers by saying, "Rest my child, it is not yet time for your requests to be granted but it is on My perfect timetable." They are assured of their rest in the meantime and that others will also have to be martyred prior to the coming of the end. When the number is complete tells us that God knows every detail of the future and all things must be complete before the end. Man will not rush the events and God will not be manipulated to bring it to pass prematurely.

The Sixth Seal

The description of the fifth seal concludes with a promise of vengeance for the martyrs. The breaking of the sixth seal describes the beginning of not only that vengeance but the beginning of the end. We have been living in the last days since the coming of Christ. With the breaking of the sixth seal all of creation will be on the brink of the very last age of history on earth.

Through the annals of history, mankind has been expecting a cataclysmic end to the earth as we know it. Religions typically always have an eschatological element and today even science is getting in on the action. Predictions of global warming that could result in a cataclysmic event join the predictions of astronomers predicting a collision between the earth and heavenly bodies. These bodies, known as stars, will collide with the earth causing it to fall off its axis and out of orbit destroying the planet as we know it. Movies have been made depicting such an event as well as novels and comic books. There just seems to be built into man a looking forward to something un-identified yet catastrophic by anyone's definition.

One could read the opening of the sixth seal as the blood of the martyrs crying out from the ground for vengeance. There seems to be a joining of natural and political forces

demonstrating the presence and power of God in wrath and judgment. Some interpreters see everything in verses 12-17 as very literal while others see symbolism for other powers. Hal Lindsay lives in California in the presence of continual threats of earth quakes and sees them as the unfolding and promise of a greater unfolding of these prophetic words. Others see the earth quakes as representative of political upheaval on a worldwide scale.

Regardless of your interpretation of the events, verses 15-17 clearly communicate the fear and unrest among humanity. It is to this day that everything on earth is moving. It is the presence of God that really makes men tremble. On this day the presence of God will be manifest in more powerful ways than mankind has known since the coming of Jesus Christ in the manger. No one can stand in the presence of God unless he is covered by the blood of the lamb. Without forgiveness the true motives of his heart and the hidden actions of his life are an open book deserving of the judgment of God. These thoughts coupled with the terrifying events of the coming day will cause men to seek places to hide yet they will not find anywhere to be hidden from God or the calamity of an earth in rebellion against the evil it has had to endure.

Dr. Vance Havner used to say, "The day will come when the most expensive piece of real estate on earth will be a hole in the ground." It seems as though at all times humanity is on the brink of worldwide calamity. Our day is no different. Our world has recently seen earthquakes, tsunami floods, violent wars, economic failure, and social unrest in numerous countries. We are in a period of time when it appears as though Revelation 6 could be bursting on the scenes. Our world systems are in many ways so fragile that any of these events could set off worldwide panic. The only real missing element is the realization of mankind that he is guilty before a holy God and the divine stands ready to bring pure judgment against sin. The wrath of God is simply always near.

The communication of this vision is to be one of hope to the readers. It seems fearful to believers when they are not relying on and trusting in the provision of God. The same God who delivered the Israelites will protect his servants. The same God who fed Elijah and clothes the lilies of the field is the same God who will see His people through. Remember, his wrath is not against those who have been forgiven but against the evils of sin and rebellion.

¹Mounce Loc. 2823

²Newport 181

³ Mounce 2850

⁴ Weirsbe Loc 1396