

Series Revelation

This message #12 Revelation 6:1-17

The diagram of the book of Revelation, which is in the appendix of this book, will help you to visualize the sequence of visions witnessed by the Apostle John. As I understand this book, these visions are organized into seven “sweeps” or “overview scans” of time, beginning with Pentecost. The first of these “sweeps” was the description of the church fellowships in chapters 2 and 3. Those fellowships were typical of fellowships which have existed since John’s day until the present time.

“Sweep” number 2 comprises chapters 4 through 7. In the fourth chapter John saw the throne room of heaven. It was a place of unimaginable brilliance. On the throne sat the One known as the “Ancient of Days” and the “Lord God Almighty,” designations of God the Father. The Father was praised by the four Living Creatures and 24 Elders for His work of physical creation. They said, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being” (*Revelation 4:11*).

In the 5th chapter of Revelation our attention was focused on the Lamb, Jesus Christ, and His qualifications to take the scroll of destiny out of the hand of the One seated on the throne. By virtue of His sacrificial death, the Lamb was praised by every creature in heaven for His work of spiritual re-creation: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (*Revelation 5:9*).

Chapters 4 and 5 set the stage for the events of chapter 6. In chapter 6 we are given an overview of the trends of history during the past 2000 years. This historical overview is not yet completed. The last part of the chapter describes circumstances which are yet future.

The scroll which was taken by the Lamb from the hand of the One seated on the throne was sealed with seven seals. This meant that all seven of the seals needed to be broken before the scroll could be opened and details about the end of the age could be revealed. As we read the verses in chapter 6, keep in mind that the seals represent the events of history leading up to the actual opening of the scroll.

Read Revelation 6:1-17

Chapter 6 is a general review of world history looked at from a heavenly spiritual perspective. As the Lamb removed the seals, John was given a picture of the forces and activities which would be operative throughout this present Church age. Verse 17 indicates that the 6th seal only brings us to the threshold of the end, just up to the onset of “the great day of wrath.” There will not be a description of final end time judgments until after all 7 seals are broken.

There is a remarkable correspondence between the history represented by the seals and the teachings of Jesus. Let me review some verses for our previous study of Matthew chapter 24: “As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. ‘Tell us,’ they said, ... ‘what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age.’”

“Jesus answered, ‘Watch out that no one deceives you. ... You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. At that time you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. ... at that time many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.’”

A few verses later, Jesus said, “Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ And a few more verses later, “When you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door” (*Matthew 24:3-14, 29, 33*).

These words of Jesus help us to understand the history of the seals, and His words confirm that He was describing the trend of this age and not just the end of the age. Jesus used numerous statements to emphasize that He was describing the trend of this age: “the end is not yet,” “these are the beginning of birth pangs,” “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come,” “immediately after the distress of those days,” and “when you see all these things, you know that it (the end) is near.”

Now let's focus on the seals. There are four horsemen associated with the first four seals. The identity and significance of the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th horsemen is not in doubt, but there is a great wide difference of opinion about the identity of the 1st rider. When “the Lamb opened the first of the seals,” John saw a rider on a white horse. The “rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.”

One group of commentators is convinced that the rider is Jesus Christ or, at least, that he represents the proclamation of the gospel of Christ. Jesus Himself taught that the kingdom of God would expand as His followers went into all the world to sow the good seed of the Word, evangelize and disciple people groups. Jesus Christ, as head of the Church, is leading in these activities. He is the “conqueror bent on (spiritual) conquest.” And, as we read from Matthew 24, there is an urgency in His work, because “the gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations before the end will come.”

There are several other important reasons to accept this interpretation about the rider on the white horse. The significance of “white” is one important clue. Throughout this book, the color “white” is always identified with Jesus. In chapter 1 it was mentioned that He had white hair as white as snow (1:14). When speaking to the churches, He said that His faithful followers would receive a white stone with a new name on it (2:17) and be given white garments to wear (3:4, 5, 18). The occupants of heaven, the Elders, and the multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language who stood before the throne and before the Lamb, all wear white robes (7:9, 13). The martyrs (6:11) are given white robes. In chapter 19, in the scene which describes the visible return of Jesus from heaven, He is riding a white horse. In chapter 20 God sits on a white throne (20:11). Thus it would be logical, according to this group of commentators, that the rider on the white horse would be Jesus.

I won't take time to present all the reasons to think that this rider represents Christ and/or the Church and/or the proclamation of the gospel, but let me give one more: In chapters 1, 3, and 5 Jesus is presented as the "conqueror" or "overcomer." In chapter 5 the Lamb, as the "Lion of the tribe of Judah and the Root of David, triumphed" over all the circumstances with which He was confronted. The "conquering" work of Christ is in harmony with the theme of this book: Christ is Gaining the Victory Over Satan and the Forces of Evil. His "conquering" work is continuing at the present time. He could be the rider on the white horse.

Another group of commentators is equally adamant that the rider on the white horse is evil. This group points out that this rider is closely associated with the other three horsemen, and since they represent destructive forces, rider Number One must also be considered evil. The rider in this scenario is the Antichrist, they say, or, at least, he represents the spirit of Antichrist. They reference the words of Jesus, "At that time many false prophets will appear and deceive many people" and suggest that the conquest may represent the kind of internal subversion which the false teachers achieved in the churches in Asia Minor. This group of commentators link the activities of the 1st rider with human depravity and the lust for domination.

There are very good arguments regarding both interpretations. It is impossible to decide conclusively which opinion is best.

Let's quickly look at the other three horsemen. The rider on the red horse has a sword and he "was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other." The word "slay" is literally "slaughter." The red horse is synonymous with bloodshed.

The 3rd horseman symbolizes the difficulties and sorrows which follow warfare. The details relate to scarcity and famine. Grain, oil, and wine were the staple foods for Middle Eastern people. One quart of wheat would be enough for one adult for one day. Three quarts of less expensive and less nutritious barley would be barely adequate for a small family. Food prices were so inflated that a person had to work all day to earn enough just to survive. Some commentators suggest that the mention of oil and wine implies social inequality, wherein the poor suffer while the rich can indulge their appetites.

The 4th horse is pale in color, with the pallor of disease and death. The rider is identified as Death, and his companion is Hades, who represents the grave and the underworld. Hades claims the bodies of all those who are killed in bloody warfare, or die as the result of famine, disease, and encounters with wild beasts. Together, Death and Hades were given power over “one-fourth of the earth.” The thought here is “no more than one-fourth of the population.”

Let’s think for a moment about some of the significant features shared by these horsemen. First, these riders are able to do their deeds only because God allows it. In spite of their evil nature, each rider is “given power” or permission to function. The Apostle Paul, his letter to the church in Rome, offered an explanation as to why God did this. Paul’s words are an analysis of human nature: (1) “Although people knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their foolish hearts were darkened. ... Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts. ... (2) Because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator, ... God gave them over to shameful lusts. ... (3) Since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, He gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.” The result: “They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity” (*Romans 1:18-32 excerpts*). What Paul is saying is that God allows people who are rebellious to do what they want to do, and if they do not want to follow God’s ways, their behavior will deteriorate deeper and deeper into the ways of evil. World conditions are evidence of the evil which exists within people.

The first 4 Seals portray troubled times on earth. They illustrate the character of the age in which we live. The 4 horsemen have thundered throughout history and in all places of the planet. Their influence is evidence of man’s cruelty and inhumane behavior towards others of his own kind. Whenever people turn away from God, unspeakable horror results. In God’s sovereign will, evil is allowed its day, but judgment is certain.

Yet there is an aspect of mercy in the conflicts of earth. Believers in the midst of danger and physical difficulties cry out to God for relief. Deprived of their rights and resources, their dependence on the protection and comfort of God becomes stronger. Spiritual and moral character is developed when sincere believers are under pressure of circumstances.

For unbelievers, the miseries of war, famine, and disease can be a means whereby individuals turn to God. In times of ease and prosperity, they would never give thought to their spiritual condition. However, when possessions and sustenance are taken away, and desperation takes over, then the hearts of some individuals open up to God.

Following the vision of the activities of the horsemen on earth, there is a change of scenery. With the opening of the 5th Seal, John saw an altar in heaven, under which were “the souls of those who had been slain.” We need to keep in mind that these seals represent the sweep of history, and throughout history since Pentecost the world has generally been hostile towards individuals who are sincere about their faith. Jesus warned His followers to expect persecution and death from councils, synagogues, and secular authorities and even betrayal from family members.

Notice the reason for the martyrdom of these souls: it was because of “the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.” They believed what God had said, and did what God wanted them to do. These souls under the altar had been faithful unto death. They had offered themselves to God, refusing to compromise their faith and deny their Lord Jesus. Concerning such people, the Psalmist wrote, “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (*Psalm 116:15*). The lives of these martyrs may have been snuffed out on earth by evildoers, but their lifeblood was poured out at the altar in heaven.

The martyrs raised their cry for justice and vindication. Their request was not made from a desire for personal revenge. Rather they were yearning for the day when the majesty and holiness and righteousness of God would be publically manifested to their tormentors and killers. They wanted their faith and testimony to be acknowledged as right and true. Several months ago we studied several Psalms. In Psalm 94 we thought about these words which express the cry of the martyrs: “O LORD, the God who avenges; O God who avenges, shine forth. Rise up, O Judge of the earth; pay back to the proud what they deserve. How long will the wicked, O LORD, how long will the wicked be jubilant?” (*Psalm 94:1-3*).

A white robe was given to each martyr. White is the color of the clothing in heaven, and the robes represented acceptance and purity. These martyrs were not given resurrection bodies. For that, they were “told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.” It seems strange to us that God has a quota of martyrs. However, because He is the God of eternity, He has a plan for every person. He knows how many individuals will come to faith and how many will be called to suffer for their faith. He will vindicate them all in His time.

When the 6th seal was opened, John saw supernatural indications that the day of the Lord was imminent. This sweep of history was coming to its climatic conclusion. All of the phenomena seen by John were previously mentioned by prophets in Old Testament passages. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Zephaniah, Haggai, were among those who described the earthquake, the changes in the sun and moon, the falling stars, the rolling up of the sky, the shifting of mountains, and the disappearance of islands. In their understanding, all these phenomena were associated with the Day of the Lord.

In His explanation to His disciples in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus quoted Isaiah: “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken” (*Matthew 24:29*). Then Jesus stated that it would be “immediately after” these cosmic disturbances that the Son of Man would appear in the clouds with great power and glory.”

The disturbances in the natural world will be very disconcerting to the unsaved inhabitants of earth. Those who would normally consider themselves secure would suddenly feel themselves helpless and be very terrified. The people in John’s vision realized that they were encountering Almighty God and they wished for death rather than face the wrath of the Lamb. Adam and Eve were the first to try to hide themselves from the Presence of God following their act of disobedience. Ever since that time rebellious, disobedient sinners have sought to ignore, deny, and avoid interaction with their holy righteous Creator, but the lesson of Scripture is that it is a terrifying experience for sinners to face the sovereign living God. For sinners there will be no place to hide. Each person will face judgment. According to the Apostle Paul, “God will give to each person according to what he has done” (*Romans 2:6*).

Next week we will think about the situation of believers. We will learn that their eternal security is never in question even though they will be in this turbulent world throughout this age.

Concluding Thoughts

- God is in control of human history.
- God allows people to suffer the consequences of their own decisions.
- Our world is filled with conquest, warfare, famine, and death.
- The number of Christian martyrs is increasing.
- God will avenge the death of His people, but He will do so on His timetable.

Some gratuitous thoughts

In future chapters we will learn that the scroll contains information about two important matters: first, the establishment of the eternal kingdom of God, and second, the judgment of God against the evil powers which control the political, economic, and religious systems of the world and the people who are involved in these systems.

Concerning the first matter, faithful followers of Jesus will be spiritually changed at the first resurrection. Scripture states, "Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven" (I Corinthians 15:49), and, "Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years," after which they will continue on to dwell with God eternally in new heavens and new earth.

Concerning the second matter, Scripture declares that God will pour out His wrath against Satan and all his helpers and followers. Wrath is God's response to evil. Wrath is one of His attributes. Because God is so totally holy, He has an innate revulsion toward anything that is unholy. Scripture makes clear that unbelievers are, by their nature, "objects of God's wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). The Apostle John himself wrote, "whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36). God assures His people that they will not be subject to His wrath, but He cannot and will not let evil go unpunished.

A Second Point of Interest: Jesus declared in the Olivet Discourse what would happen, and His explanation was in the same order as the vision seen by John. Matthew 24 verses 5 and 6 describe the 1st Seal: "Many will come in my name ... and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars." Matthew 24 verses 7 and 8 describe the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Seals: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places." Jesus not only declared in advance to His disciples (including John!), what would happen, He was the One who opened the Seals and made it possible for the riders to go forth. What John heard on the Mount of Olives was similar to the information he saw in the vision.

There is one more point I want to make before concluding. We have been considering the sweep of history during this Church Age. We live in a world in which evil is rampant, as is suffering. The inhumanity and indignity heaped on people by other more powerful people is beyond our imagination. Believers, in particular, have been, and are, subjected to the hatred and maliciousness of evildoers. The teachings of Jesus, "In the world you will have tribulation," and "If they hated me they will hate you," along with the description of the martyrs in the 5th seal, make it clear that the Church is not exempt. The faith of those who are prepared to stake everything, even their lives, on the Word and witness of God will be tested. Freedom from persecution will only come at the end of the age, when the Father's quota of the faithful is met, when the day of vindication will come.