

Visions From Heaven
A Study of Revelation:

“Where’s It Going?”

Bible Reading:
Revelation 6: 1-17

PREPARED BY
KEN GEHRELS
PASTOR
CALVIN CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH
NEPEAN, ONTARIO

We've all seen the pictures and heard the correspondents' description.

The Taliban are gone from official power in Afghanistan. Formally, the war is over. But the damage - oh, the carnage that has been left behind. The social and economic chaos that remains! Millions barely hang on to survival. Devastation is everywhere - the result of peoples' misguided desire for control and power over the nation.

Almost overwhelming, this situation is.

As if we're powerless to stop it.

To the point where it seems as if, if news reports are correct, that Canada is saying "enough" and going home. We're giving up, as a nation.

That's only one situation at one time in one place in God's creation. It is replicated over and over again across the globe and throughout history. Devastation, destruction rolling through Creation in a way that seems unstoppable.

Last week we considered Revelation 5 - the vision of Jesus, the Lamb of God with the power of a Lion, the Lion of Judah.

He, says this part of God's Word, is the only one anywhere who has the power to bring this devastation under control and to an eventual stop.

Chapter 6 takes up the hope of ch.5, and gives us an overview of the beginning of that process of stopping the destruction; the process of restoring justice and peace - true shalom to a battered creation.

In chapter 5 the Lamb has the scroll, the divine "daytimer" detailing all of God's planned judgements on the world. The scroll is rolled up and closed with seven seals. Until all the seals are removed the judgements cannot begin.

Now, in chapter 6, the Lamb begins to peel back those seals, one by one. And as he does John has revealed to him by the angel of God various details of the great drama in the overcoming of the devastation of sin and evil.

THE WHITE HORSE OF CONQUEST

The first seal is ripped back, the voice from heaven thunders its permission, and a white horse thunders out of the gate. Now please don't confuse this white horse with the one shown in 19.11, which is Jesus Christ.

The white horse of chapter 7, the creature of the first seal, pictures the spirit of conquest which afflicts and possesses so many people down through history: Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Charlemagne, Phillip of Spain, Napoleon, Hitler, Hussein.

With a bow, or whatever weapons of force and conquest they could assemble, they go out seeking to submit others by force to their whims and aspirations.

"Am I my brother's keeper?"

Like Lamech avenging seven-fold for a single wrong done them.

It is the evil of not looking to others and their well-being.

THE RED HORSE OF WAR

Then the second seal.

Again we see the devastation of sin multiplied. All from the first sin of stubborn rebellion against God. It has spread like a wild brush fire. People in war against each other. How many years of peace has this world seen? Have there been any where there was not war in some country? I can't think of any in the 20th century. And I dare say that when we include the constant tribal skirmishes there hasn't been peace for thousands of year. Man killing man, and woman, and child. As we heard at Redeemer High this week — now children killing children.

The blood of humanity soaking the ground bright red.

The peace of paradise, the nakedness and freedom from shame, the total exposure that people could enjoy with each other ----

GONE!

THE BLACK HORSE OF FAMINE

And what comes so often with war?

See the third seal broken.

Devastation to the earth. Remember Saddam's scorched earth policy in Kuwait? Pollution that totally devastated the environment in that part of the world, choking stinking smoke and petroleum residue. Killing off the sea life that was a source of food, and clogging the desalination plants that made vital fresh water for the Kuwaiti and Saudi population to drink.

Or today in Sudan - the national Arabic government takes its Canadian Talisman oil-funded armies and weapons into the African south. Not only has it killed 2.5 million people and displaced 5 million others, but it has destroyed countless villages and cities, ruined crops and fields, devastated infrastructure. This on top of the creeping reaches of the Sahara desert and horrible drought conditions.

What is left of Afghanistan? Or Bosnia? Or Rwanda? Or Indonesia?

The black horse of famine.

Those of you that lived through the starvation in the cities of Europe during WWII know all about this.

And there is the curse on creation. Where man toils for food, there are only thorns and thistles. The lush, fertile, well-watered grounds of Paradise are no longer available.

Or think of the growing effects of global warming on the environment with floods and droughts.

The creeping poison of pollution - toxins filling the environment, mutating life forms, harboring cancers and disease.

The black horse.

THE PALE HORSE OF DEATH

And then the fourth seal.

Here is the last and most frightening horse. It is the horse that seems to summarize the effects of the white, red and black horses. It is horrible to look at. The Greek word seems to indicate sort of a pale green colour, the colour of a middle-eastern person after death.

"In the day you eat thereof, you shall surely die."

That was God's warning to our first parents.

They ignored it.

And the pale horse has been with us ever since.

LIMITED DEVASTATION

There are some who speak of these four horsemen as being judgements from God upon the world. As I said earlier, that cannot be, for the judgements are contained in the scroll of chapter 5, and the scroll cannot be read till **all** the seals are removed, including the seventh seal. The opening of the first six seals gives but a picture of what is going on in creation in the time leading up to the final judgement of God.

These are warnings - signs of what is yet to come.

So who suffers the effects of these horsemen?

The whole world and all creation, believers included.

If you doubt that, ask our brothers and sisters in Africa and Indonesia.

Ask the Christian farmer on the Canadian prairie whose livelihood has been threatened by years of drought.

Yes, all humanity suffers.

And history bears that out, doesn't it? Conquest, war, famine and death – they have been present ever since the Fall, and they remain to this day. At various times of history, in varying intensities, these horrible horsemen have galloped to and fro across the earth.

One important thing to note, though.

The devastation is limited in scope.

Evil **cannot** consume the entire Creation.

Satan is **unable** to destroy all of God's ordered Cosmos.

History, the scroll, remains in control of the one who sits on the throne and the Lamb. The effects of evil, and evil-doers can go so far, but no more! They are limited - chained.

- Death and Hades have power over 1/4 of the earth
- Black horse could not attack oil and wine
- The events don't happen till the Lamb opens the seals
- Until the number of those to be killed was completed

The first four seals describe the devastation that is being brought on the earth by the horrors and rebellions of sin. It is a world in turmoil.

Romans 8 speaks of this world when it declares:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time...

That groaning becomes vocalized in the 5th seal when the saints cry out.

THE SAINTS CRY OUT

There we see those who had been martyred for their faith. They are, as it were, under the altar.

As in so many places of *Revelation* there are Old Testament references here. Two of them at this point.

First, in Old Testament times the priest serving at the altar of God in the temple would take the blood of sacrificial animals and perform several rituals with it. The remainder of the blood would be flung against the base of the altar and run down into a trough that ran around the base. There it would stain the altar and soak the ground. Where this blood pooled was the location called "*under the altar.*"

Second reference is the account of the murder of Abel. We read in Genesis 4:10 that his blood cried out from the ground.

Revelation 6: Saints who have been martyred -- believers from China, Russia, Holland, Sudan, Indonesia, Great Britain, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam –

They cry out to God and seek a setting right of the scales of justice.

They call for their blood to be avenged.

"Is that right," we say?

Are we not supposed to love our enemies?

Isn't THAT what the bible calls for?

A personal desire for revenge, for getting even, is wrong.

But that's not what's happening here in seal #5. It's not the issue.

The issue is **justice**.

It is for **justice** that the saints are calling -

the Justice of God to be executed on the earth.

evil to be exposed;
wrong to be set right.

And justice **will** come.

God will set all things right.

Evil will be punished..... at the right time.

Until then those who suffer and die in faith, those who have been burdened and victimized by injustice, are called to rest in heaven.

Yes, the day of justice will come.

Yes, the day will come when evil and unrepentant sinners will receive the full weight of heavenly justice.

Yes, the day will come when the earth will be cleansed and those saved by Jesus will again inhabit Paradise.

But until then they must wait in heaven a little longer.

THE SIXTH SEAL - GOD'S JUDGEMENT

And what will come as the answer to their waiting?

How will God's judgement be revealed?

The answer comes with the 6th seal;

the judgement that God will bring is hinted at.

Those who had been sitting secure and comfortable during the first 4 seals,
untouched by disaster

possibly causing some of it themselves,

They suddenly find all their security falling away.

Terror fills them.

Those who seemed so invincible, so powerful, so controlling

are now left to whimper and whine pathetically;

seeking cover where none is to be found.

What is the apocalyptic picture presented here?

A symbol of terror.

People who were so secure in earthly riches, earthly comforts, earthly power structures, earthly seasons and rhythms now find all of that pulled like a rug out from under them.

Again - back to the Old Testament.

Every picture of destruction pictured here is found in the First Testament.

-Earthquake (Ex 19.18, Is.2.19)

-Sun & Moon (Joel 2.28-3.3)

-Stars and sky (Is 34.2-4)

-Mountains & islands (Nah 1.5, Jer 4.24, Ps 114)

God doesn't hide His living reality any longer.

People see His unveiled power and might - and are frightened, much as Israel was frightened when they gathered at Mt. Sinai and saw the glory of God hinted at – earthquake, thick cloud, lightning and thunder. They said,

"Moses, you go. You speak to God and then tell us what He said. We can't bear to face God. It would kill us!"

(Exodus 20:18).

The great generals and princes, the rich and mighty of the earth cry out:

"Save us from the face of Him who sits on the throne."

"Save us from the wrath of the Lamb."

Ah, yes - the Lamb, Jesus Christ, is not merely the baby in the manger, meek and mild. The Lamb who suffers, and who earlier in chapter 5 has been shown to care so much about people that he was willing to die in order to purchase them for God, is also the Lamb who will execute great wrath on those who continue to rebel and stand against him. He will finally say, "*enough!*" to those who continue to ignore him and pretend for all intents and purposes that he doesn't exist.

REVELATION AND LUKE 21

Revelation 21 is not the first time these sorts of distresses are referred to in this type and order. Luke 21 portrays Jesus describing the same thing to his disciples – distresses that affect God's creation in the upheaval before the final judgement arrives.

Consider the parallels:

<u>Rev 6</u>	<u>Luke 21</u>	<u>EVENT</u>
2-3	7-8	false "messiah" figures; charismatic leaders
4	9-10	wars and revolutions
5	11	earthquakes and famine
8	11	pestilence and death
9	12	persecution
12-17	25	apocalyptic signs in heavens & God's wrath

CONCLUSION

So, what do we say at the end of it all?

What does this picture do for us?

One - there is comfort here for brothers and sisters of ours who struggle, who suffer, who cry in despair and pain. There **will** come an end to their suffering. Their cause is not overlooked. Their lives are **not** wasting away in empty darkness. They matter! And the Greatest One, the God of Hosts, holds them and their eternity.

Two - as we stand faced with all the suffering, we can work - hard - towards alleviating suffering. We can strive - hard - for justice. For when we do, we are lining up with the cause of the God of Justice. We are, in some preliminary and forward looking way, doing His work.

Which means we **don't** have to be helpless in the face of oppression and persecution as we encounter it around the world. We can challenge it. Confront it. Fight it in the name of Him who sits on the throne, and the Lamb.

We can.

We must.

Three - find renewed motivation in the urgent task of bringing the gospel of grace and salvation to sinners who have not heard. For, otherwise, what is their end?

God's desire, says the prophet Ezekiel is this:

do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicket? Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? (18:23)

It is the cry of Jesus:

Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem.... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings....."

(Mt 23:37)

Which is why Jesus said:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

I wonder - how faithful to this call are we as a congregation?

To the cause of building the vision and working towards justice for the suffering?

To the cause of spreading the gospel of Jesus?

Revelation 6 causes us to ask some questions, and, as we enter a summer season of rest and reflection - to perhaps consider how we'll need to respond as a congregation in the coming season.