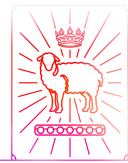


The opening of the seals.

Revelation 6:1-17

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Revelation
JESUS IS REVEALING



Revelation 6 brings us to the very first of the judgment passages in Revelation. These judgment passages will dominate the middle section of the book, and yet they are crucial to the original reader, even if they strike us as odd and off-putting. It might be helpful for us to imagine an artistic representation of these events. Think, for example, of Pablo Picasso's famous painting "Guernica," created in 1937. It's a jumbled chaos of distorted body parts. It doesn't portray reality in a photographic way. But it is nonetheless real. It powerfully conveys the horrors of the Spanish Civil War. The same is true of Revelation chapters 6 – 9. At first sight, these chapters appear weird, alien—even surreal. But they're not a newspaper report. They're an artistic portrayal of the horrors of the first century. This is our world. Picasso was heavily influenced by El Greco's seventeenth-century painting "The Opening of the Fifth Seal," a depiction of the martyrs beneath the throne in 6:9-11, which used to hang in a gallery near Picasso's Paris home. If you're reading chapters 6 – 9 in the comfort of your home in a quiet suburb, then they may well seem surreal. But if you stand back and view them from a wider perspective, you will find they capture the turmoil of history—they feel all too real. What do you see? That's the question posed in chapters 4 – 11. And all too often, what we see is the chaos and brutality of history. But what do we see when we look at God's Word?²

When we read chapter six through the lens of hope, it cuts through the chaos of the images and reveals an important truth to us, that truth is **courageous faith is rooted in the Lamb.**

¹ *Guernica* by [Pablo Picasso](#). 1937. Oil on canvas.

² Chester, Tim. *Revelation For You: Seeing history from heaven's perspective* (pp. 62-63). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

1. Don't forget the original audience.

a. They needed to know that God would avenge them. (vv.9-10)

- i. There is so much happening in this passage that we can easily gloss over what is the central picture presented and the one that would have stood out to the original readers like a shining light.
- ii. **The central image is the martyrs that are under the throne.**
 1. This is an odd image, what is probably in mind is the association or virtual equation in both Revelation and Jewish writings of this altar with the throne of God, whose sovereign purposes ultimately protect the saints. **Therefore, placing the saints under the altar emphasizes the divine protection that has held sway over their "soul" despite even their loss of physical life because of persecution.**³
 2. Retribution is a divine prerogative. Some think that the prayer of the martyrs here is less Christian than say Stephen's prayer for his killers (Acts 7:60). But we must see it in the light of John's interest in the theology of power. It is not a plea against individuals but a call for the reversal of the world's judgment on God's people.⁴
 3. Their response is prayer that the reputation of God and his people be vindicated. The reputation of God's justice is at stake because he will be considered unjust if he does not punish sin.⁵
- iii. The simple truth is that when believers in the first-century read this letter, they heard that God was not indifferent or calloused to their suffering. Instead, he saw them, held their salvation secure, and helped them endure faithfully. As if that was not enough, he also promised to rule justly over all evil they experienced.
 1. This is a really important message that we will miss if we just try to figure out the four horseman.
 2. To understand the power of vv. 9-10, we need a snap shot of life for them.

b. Life in the Roman Empire – A general snapshot.

- i. **Social Hierarchy:** Roman society was structured hierarchically, with the emperor at the top followed by senators, equestrians, free citizens, freed slaves, and slaves. Slavery was widespread, and slaves endured harsh living and working conditions. On the other hand, affluent citizens and the elite could enjoy a more comfortable lifestyle.
- ii. **Economic Disparities:** The empire encompassed a vast territory, and economic conditions varied across regions. In urban areas, particularly Rome, there were opportunities for trade, commerce, and specialized occupations. However, rural areas often faced agricultural hardships, and small farmers could be burdened by heavy debts and high taxes.
- iii. **Gladiatorial Games and Violence:** The Romans had a strong appetite for spectacles, including gladiatorial games, chariot races, and animal hunts. Slaves and prisoners of

³ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 391–392.

⁴ Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 109.

⁵ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 392.

war often fought as gladiators, enduring brutal training and facing the risk of death for the entertainment of the masses. Public executions were also common.

- iv. **Health and Hygiene:** Sanitation and public health infrastructure varied greatly. While some cities had advanced systems for aqueducts, public baths, and sewage, others lacked these amenities. Disease and epidemics, such as malaria, dysentery, and lead poisoning from plumbing, were persistent challenges.
- v. **Women and Children:** Women in Roman society had limited legal rights and were primarily expected to fulfill domestic roles. Childbirth and infant mortality rates were high, and life expectancy was relatively low, particularly for those in lower social classes.

c. Societal expectations then and now.

- i. Inequity was the modus operandi – There was very little expectation of experiencing justice in the face of injustice in the first century. → Especially if you were a Christian.
 - 1. ¹ **I BECAME acquainted through God with your much beloved name, which you have obtained by your righteous nature, according to faith and love in Christ Jesus our Saviour.** You are imitators of God, and, having kindled your brotherly task by the blood of God, you completed it perfectly. ² For when you heard that I had been sent a prisoner from Syria for the sake of our common name and hope, in the hope of obtaining by your prayers the privilege of fighting with beasts at Rome, that by so doing I might be enabled to be a true disciple, you hastened to see me.⁶
 - a. Ignatius of Antioch to the church in Ephesus.
 - b. **This comment is likely written some 18 years after John writes Revelation.**
 - 2. **Who is Ignatius of Antioch?** - THE epistles or letters of Ignatius are among the most famous documents of early Christianity, and have a curiously complicated literary history. Eusebius in *Historia Ecclesiastica* iii. 36 tells the story of Ignatius. He was the third bishop of Antioch in Syria, and was condemned to be sent to Rome to be killed by the beasts in the amphitheatre. His journey took him through various churches in Asia Minor and while he was in Smyrna he wrote letters to Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, and Rome, and later on, when he reached Troas he wrote to the Philadelphians, Smyrnaeans, and Polycarp the bishop of Smyrna. In his *chronicon* Eusebius fixes the date of his martyrdom in Rome in the tenth year of Trajan, i.e. 108 A.D.⁷
- ii. We live in a culture that not only demands justice (that is the fair and equitable application of laws and jurisprudence) but also expects it to happen.
 - 1. This was absolutely not the case in Rome.
- iii. We also live in a democratic republic where every two years at a minimum all citizens get a chance to vote leaders into or out of office.
 - 1. In the first century only a third to half of the Roman Empire had citizenship of any kind. That means the other 50-70% of the empire lived with minimal rights and legal protections that were only granted by the general household codes.

d. The four horseman. (vv. 1-8) → Okay, what do we do with this image?

⁶ Pope Clement I et al., *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 1, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1912–1913), 173–175.

⁷ Pope Clement I et al., *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 1, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1912–1913), 166.

- i. **The first four seals form a unity. They show us the self-defeating character of sin. When the spirit of self-aggrandizement and conquest is abroad, all God needs to do is to let events take their course and sinners will inevitably be punished.** (Cf. Rom. 1) In the wake of conquest come war and famine and pestilence. This is not the whole story and other aspects are brought out later (as in the first four trumpets, which show that God is not inactive: he sends his judgments on sinful people). But this is the aspect with which John is concerned here. After the first four seals comes a group of two dealing with things in heaven rather than on earth. The final seal stands apart from all the rest. **It is kept back until 8:1 and ushers in the next series of visions. We shall find this pattern of four, two and one repeated with the trumpets and the bowls.**⁸
 - 1. The white horse – a conquering warrior (v.2)
 - 2. The red horse – removes peace from the earth (chaos) (v.4)
 - 3. The black horse – carries scales and brings famine (v. 5)
 - 4. The pale horse – brings death and pestilence (v. 8)
 - a. Each of the horses colors give visual representation to the destruction they bring.
- ii. How am I to understand these images?
 - 1. **Jesus judges sin** – *The Lamb* himself opened one of the seals to initiate the first judgment. It may well be that we are to understand Christ's saving work as including an element of judgment. **Christ's death was not only salvation from sin but condemnation of sin.**⁹
 - 2. **God is in control** – They do not go out without God's awareness or authority.¹⁰
 - a. Caution – just because God permits something to happen, does not mean he causes it.
 - 3. **Human sin** – The four horseman represent the implications of our sin. It does not take us long to recognize this reality through human history. I.e., **These are not cosmic but human forces at work.**¹¹
- e. This bring us back to the original audience, in this passage they saw a God who saw them and had divine ability and provision.
 - i. The reality of God's ability and provision inspired them to live with courageous faith.
 - ii. How do we live with courageous faith?

2. Worthiness – Divine Ability

- a. **Courageous faith looks to God's ability. (vv. 1, 9-10, 17)**
 - i. We cannot read this section without the reminder that it is the Lamb alone that is worthy, and because he is worthy, he has the ability to open the seals and work out the Father's plans to bring redemptive history to its rightful conclusion.
 - 1. I.e., **Nothing happens from here on out without the Lamb's command, authority, or ability.**

⁸ Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 103.

⁹ Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 103–104.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 104.

¹¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 124.
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- ii. The martyrs do not look to seek their own vengeance → They cry out to the Lord and wait on him.
 - 1. The martyrs address God in *a loud voice*. *Sovereign Lord* renders *ho despotēs* (used of God in Luke 2:29; Acts 4:24, and of Christ in 2 Pet. 2:1; Jude 4; it could be either in 2 Tim. 2:21). It is the word for a master of slaves and thus emphasizes God's complete power.¹²
 - a. They cry out to the Lord based on his character and nature: **He is *holy and true***
 - 2. The believers have been "slaughtered," which is the same term used of the "slain Lamb" in 5:6. This has happened because of "the word of God and the testimony they had maintained," a formula that also occurs in 1:2, 9, and 20:4, and is paraphrased in 12:17 and 14:12.
 - 3. **The church's response to opposition is not passive flight but active witness.**¹³
 - 4. It should not be lost on us that the martyrs are aware of their lack of ability and equally aware of the completeness of God's ability. They only look to and cry out to him for justice.
- b. How are we to look to God's divine ability so that we can live with courageous faith?
 - i. **Did God make my day?** – This is the question of enjoying God by getting to know him through his Word.
 - 1. It is hard for me to trust God if I don't really know him or I'm relying on an elementary-aged understanding of him.
 - 2. Again, the striking call of the martyrs and their willing to wait and trust the Lord is rooted in that they know his character and his nature.
 - 3. How am I to know God's character and nature if I do not spend time reading his Word, which he gave us so that we would know him.
 - a. This is specifically referred to as the doctrine of divine special revelation. – God revealed himself to us specifically through the Scriptures.
 - 4. What is your next intentional step in this area?
 - ii. **Is the Spirit flowing through me?** – This is the question of my prayer life and dependence on God through his Spirit for strength and discernment.
 - 1. We need to examine and ask, who really is in charge of my life? → I have shared before that I often struggle with adjusting to God's diversions in my day. So often, I have my calendar set and expect God to come along with my plans. **That is not how it is to go if we are following Christ.**
 - a. One of the most freeing prayers I have learned to pray, and I pray it first thing in the day, "Lord, what do you have for me to be about today?"
 - b. This simple prayer reorients my attitude, expectations, and positions me to look to God's ability and plans and not my own.
 - 2. **What is our posture in prayer?** Telling God or talking with God (which involves listening)?
 - iii. **How are my investments doing?** – One of the most significant steps of courageous faith for us today might just be **aligning my resources with purposes of God and surrendering them to the will and authority of God.**

¹² Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 108–109.

¹³ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 128.

1. Danielle is a naturally generous person, and there is nothing that terrifies me more than her willingness to be generous! Why? Because she routinely has the perspective of looking to God's divine ability, and I so often look to my ability.
2. When we are radically generous with our time, talents, and treasure, we are living in courageous faith because we are declaring that my security is not in my hands, instead, I am trusting God to provide and praising him for how he has provided.

3. Authority – Divine Provision

a. Courageous faith looks to and remembers God's provision.

- i. Remember, the entire purpose of this letter was not be something to be decoded so that we could know the events of history before they unfold or even as they unfold. Instead, it was to inspire hope in a group of people who were struggling so that they would walk in faithfulness.
 1. **Another, don't forget** – The first two visions in this letter were not of events to come, but were of God himself! → John wants them and us to have confidence in the character and nature of God so that we would respond in trust and courageous faith moving forward.
- ii. In other words, the book of Revelation is designed to help us continually remember who God is and what he has done, while simultaneously pointing us forward to what he will yet do. → Again, this is all designed to foster a bold trust in God for us.
 1. How do we trust God boldly for the future? → By actively remembering the past.

b. The spiritual disciple of remembering.

- i. Powerful examples of remembering in the OT.
 1. **Noah's Altar (Genesis 8:20)**: After the floodwaters receded and Noah and his family exited the ark, Noah built an altar to the Lord and offered burnt offerings on it as an act of worship and thanksgiving.
 2. **Abraham's Altars (Genesis 12:7-8; Genesis 13:18)**: Throughout his journeys, Abraham built altars in various places to worship and call upon the name of the Lord. These altars served as markers of his encounters with God and reminders of God's promises.
 3. **Moses' Altar (Exodus 17:15)**: When the Israelites battled the Amalekites at Rephidim, Moses built an altar and named it Yahweh-Nissi, meaning "The Lord is my Banner." This altar stood as a memorial to God's victory and a reminder of His faithfulness.
 4. **Joshua's Altar (Joshua 4:8-9)**: After the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, Joshua commanded twelve men to take stones from the riverbed and build an altar as a memorial. The stones served as a visual reminder of God's miraculous provision in parting the Jordan.
 - a. **⁶that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' ⁷ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever.** – Joshua 4:6-7

5. **Samuel's Ebenezer (1 Samuel 7:12):** Samuel set up a stone and named it Ebenezer, meaning "stone of help." This memorial was established after God granted the Israelites victory over the Philistines, and it symbolized God's assistance and deliverance.
- ii. How do we practice remembering?
 1. **Look** – Are you looking for the ways God is working in and through your life? Do you see yourself at the provider or God as the provider?
 2. **Record** – When you see God at work, do you note it and record it, or respond in apathy or entitlement?
 - a. Something happens when we make a habit of recording how God provided – a mountain of evidence and faithfulness begins to become glaringly present to us.
 - b. Record it by – journaling, art, a word doc, etc. ... just be intentional.
 3. **Tell** – Do you talk about it with anyone?
 - a. I love Joshua's words... when your children ask and these will be a memorial forever. → Memorials only have value from generation to generation because we talk about them and share their importance.
 - b. Do you assume your kids, friends, or family members will just get that God is faithful, or are you making a habit to talk about it with them?
- iii. Our future faith is spurred on by the past. And, if we want to be people of courageous faith, we need to be people who routinely remember what the Lamb has done.
 1. This is the purpose of communion.
 2. This is one of the purposes of gathered worship.
 3. But, let us not just assume one hour on one day is all we were meant to experience. God desires to commune with you everyday

Additional Notes:

On the nature of the vision: Readers do well to ask themselves what they expect from these visions. Many are fascinated with the seven seals because they think that the text issues predictions about a series of events that will occur in the future. They assume that if they can match the visions with events in the news, they will be able to tell when the end of the world will come. According to this approach, we will know that we have arrived at the first seal when we see some world power embarking on the path of conquest. We will know when we have arrived at the second seal when the threat of violence spreads. As violence leads to economic hardship, we will find ourselves at the third seal, and so forth until God's wrath is poured out and the kingdom of God arrives with the opening of the sixth and seventh seals.

"Prediction" is not the right word for these visions, however, because they depict threats that do not fall neatly on a timeline. Virtually everyone understands that the four horsemen have a symbolic or representative quality. We realize that the text is not telling us to expect the end-times to begin when we see a solitary figure

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with a bow in his hand riding a white horse through the streets of our city, but we recognize that the visions stand for larger realities. The text makes clear that the horsemen represent conquest, violence, economic hardship, and death. These were genuine threats for people in the first century and they have remained threats for people in subsequent centuries, which is why attempts to predict the onset of the end-times on the basis of these visions have consistently failed. The dangers that they depict cannot be confined to any one period: waves of conquest, outbreaks of violence, and periods of economic hardship have occurred repeatedly in human history, and death finally comes to all.

The principal purpose of the visions in Revelation 6 is to awaken a sense of uneasiness in readers by vividly identifying threats to their well-being. The four horsemen are designed to shatter the illusion that people can find true security in the borders of a nation or empire, in a flourishing economy, or in their own health. Subsequent visions promise that God will not allow injustice to continue forever—which is assuring to the victims but disturbing to the perpetrators—and warn that no place on earth and no position of power or wealth will protect people from the judgment of God and the Lamb. Those who grasp the way that these visions relentlessly undercut human pretensions will find themselves asking the final question in the chapter: “Who is able to stand?” (6:17). Those who have been moved to ask this question are rightly prepared for the visions that follow in chapter 7.¹⁴

On God’s role in sending the four horsemen: Where is God in all of this? In one sense God does not exactly inflict these plagues on the world, since the four horsemen are the powers that are directly responsible for the threat. Yet it is also clear that these threatening powers do not operate independently of God. Each horseman appears only after the Lamb has broken a seal on the scroll that he received from God and only after one of the living creatures that stand beside God’s throne has given the command: “Come!”¹⁵

- **What about the nature of evil?** → We will see in subsequent chapters that visions like these do not attempt to explain why there is evil in the world. John is keenly aware that threats to human life cannot always be ascribed to God because a number of forces are at work in the world. It is true that God creates both “weal and woe” (Isa. 45:7), that God can “kill and make alive,” and that he can “wound and heal” (Deut. 32:39). At the same time, the world is also the arena in which Satan operates and human sin wreaks havoc. In many of Revelation’s visions carnage is created by the beast and its allies, who are not agents of God but opponents of God. **Therefore, because multiple forces are at work, people cannot always tell whether what they perceive to be a threat comes from God, from Satan, or from human sin.**¹⁶

¹⁴ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 85.

¹⁵ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 89.

¹⁶ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 89.