

“Seven Seals” (Revelation 6)

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We live in a judgmental age. There’s no doubt about that. Now more than ever, it seems, people are willing to condemn others quickly, without much thought. To know this, just go on the Internet. Go to Twitter and Facebook or read the comments on YouTube. People give their quick, dismissive, “hot takes” on just about anything online.

But, ironically, people don’t like the idea of God judging. CNN’s Don Lemon, when being interviewed on the talk show *The View*, said that God is not about hindering or judging people.¹ He’s not alone in stating that God doesn’t judge. However, this statement is made out of pure ignorance. Open the pages of the Bible and see that God does indeed judge. He judges in the Old Testament and the New. Jesus often taught about a coming day of judgment. This is no small doctrine. The reason why God judges is because he loves, because he’s good, and because he hates sin. It is good that God judges.

However, it won’t be good for those who continue to oppose God. Judgment is good for God’s people. God’s judgment is a promise that God will punish all wrongdoing and avenge his people. God’s final judgment will usher in a new age without sin, an age of peace and joy and rest. In order to bring about that new creation, God must remove sin from this world. And he will do that through judgment.

Today, as we continue to study the book of Revelation, we’ll start to see the many depictions of judgment that are found in this book. Before we start reading, here’s a very quick recap of what we’ve seen so far. Jesus appears to a man named John at the end of the first century. He speaks to John, and he also lets John see images that are fascinating and even bizarre from our perspective. Though strange, these images are full of symbolic meaning, and we get that sense from even the first chapter of the book. Jesus tells John to write to seven churches, telling them what Jesus approves and what Jesus condemns. This book is meant to instruct churches to continue in the faith and to avoid idolatry and compromise. Then, Jesus gives John a view of heaven, particularly God’s majestic throne room. Last week, we saw that Jesus is worthy of worship, for Jesus is divine, and Jesus has the authority and power to open the seals of the

¹ <https://thehill.com/homenews/media/543296-cnns-don-lemon-on-vatican-refusing-to-bless-same-sex-unions-god-is-not-about>.

scroll that contains God’s plan for salvation and judgement. This week, in chapter 6, we see Jesus remove the seals of the scroll.

So, let’s start reading. I’ll start by reading verses 1–8:

¹ 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!” ² 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.

³ When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” ⁴ 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.

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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!”

⁷ When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” ⁸ 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.²

The opening of the first four seals releases four horses and their riders. These are the so-called “four horsemen of the Apocalypse.” Notice that it is Jesus’ actions that release these four horsemen. Jesus is the one who is responsible for what they do. If Jesus did not open the seals, they would not be released into the world.

These four horsemen bring trials upon the whole world, trials that affect both Christians and non-Christians. And these trials don’t just come in the so-called “end times.” These events are ones that occur throughout this age. Yet Jesus is in control of it all.

The first rider goes out to conquer, to make war. The second rider removes peace from the world, leading to civil war. The third rider brings famine. And the fourth rider is Death himself. He is followed by Hades, the realm of the dead, and they kill with sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts.

The image of four horses comes from the Old Testament, specifically from the book of Zechariah. In chapter 6 of Zechariah, four horses go out to patrol the earth. It’s not entirely clear what they do when they patrol the earth, but it seems that they judge the nations and gather

² All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

God's people. These four horses have something to do with both judging and saving. They will judge the nations opposed to God's people, the very nations that God used to punish Israel when Israel disobeyed God and chased false gods.

There are also other Old Testament passages that provide some background commentary. I'll mention them somewhat quickly. If you're interested, you can read these passages later. In the Old Testament, God made a covenant with Israel. If the people obeyed God, they would be his treasured possession, a holy nation, a kingdom of priests (Exod. 19:4–6). If they obeyed God, God would bless them. If they disobeyed God, they would be cursed. In Leviticus 26:21–26 and Deuteronomy 32:23–25, there are specific curses that are mentioned. They include wild beasts, the sword, pestilence, and famine—the same things we read here in Revelation. Other nations would attack them with the sword. The mentions of “wild beasts” might be symbolic, representing those fierce enemies. Their food supply would be broken through pestilence and famine. If they survived the sword, they might not survive the lack of food.

These same four curses are mentioned in the book of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 5:15–17 and Ezekiel 14:12–23, God promised that Israel would suffer the sword, wild beasts, pestilence, and famine.

Why would God tell Israel about these threats of judgment? I think God provides promises of salvation and judgment in part as a motivation to pursue God. God knows the human psyche better than we do. He knows that we are motivated by promises of rewards and threats of judgment. If we understand that God will reward his people for their faith, we will endure in the faith, even through trials. Threats of judgment may cause us to wake up from our apathy.

Here's a wonderful example of that reality: Some of us may know the name Christopher Hitchens. He was a British writer who became an American citizen, and he was quite famously an atheist, or, as he put it, an “antitheist.” He wrote a book called *god is not Great*. (Yes, the lower-case *g* of *god* is intentional.) His brother is Peter Hitchens, who doesn't have Christopher's level of fame. Yet Peter is well known in England as a journalist and social commentator. And though Peter, like Christopher, raged against God in his youth, he came back to God as an adult.

Part of his experience of coming back to God was viewing a painting that depicted judgment. While in France, Peter Hitchens visited an ancient hospital, or hospice, because a guidebook said that it was worth the trip to see Rogier van der Weyden's fifteenth-century altar

piece, a polyptych, or multi-paneled painting. That work of art is called *The Last Judgment*. Here are some of Peter's words:

I scoffed. Another religious painting! Couldn't these people think of anything else to depict? Still scoffing, I peered at the naked figures fleeing toward the pit of hell, out of my usual faintly morbid interest in the alleged terrors of damnation. But this time I gaped, my mouth actually hanging open. These people did not appear remote or from the ancient past; they were my own generation. Because they were naked, they were not imprisoned in their own age by time-bound fashions. On the contrary, their hair and, in an odd way, the set of their faces were entirely in the style of my own time. They were me and the people I knew. One of them—and I have always wondered how the painter thought of it—is actually vomiting with shock and fear at the sound of the Last Trump.

I did not have a "religious experience." Nothing mystical or inexplicable took place—no trance, now swoon, no vision, no voices, no blaze of light. But I had a sudden, strong sense of religion being a thing of the present day, not imprisoned under thick layers of time. A large catalogue of misdeeds, ranging from the embarrassing to the appalling, replayed themselves rapidly in my head. I had absolutely no doubt that I was among the damned, if there were any damned.³

Hitchens then talks about how he didn't know an adult could have such fear by such things. He had felt fear during car accidents and times when, as a journalist, he was in foreign countries and experienced angry crowds and even gunfire. But then he says,

But the most important time was when I stood in front of Rogier van der Weyden's great altarpiece and trembled for the things of which my conscience was afraid (and *is* afraid). Fear is good for us and helps us to escape from great dangers. Those who do not feel it are in permanent peril because they cannot see the risks that lie at their feet.⁴

We are often afraid to talk about judgment because we don't want to be seen as those "fire and brimstone" types who always talk about the flames of hell. But hell is a reality, a very real destination awaiting those who reject Jesus. And God uses depictions of judgment to instill a healthy fear in us. At the least, no one who hears these depictions can say they were never warned.

So, that's a general point about why God would give us these images. But why will God judge in this horrific way? The reason why God judges is because sin is destructive. It is lawlessness, rebellion against God. It is a rejection of our Creator and Designer. It doesn't bring

³ Peter Hitchens, *The Rage Against God: How Atheism Led Me to Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 102–103.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

us life, but instead it brings us death. God hates sin because God loves goodness and he loves his creation. He wants to redeem a people from sin, to rescue them from the corrosive effects of sin. He hates it when people harm his people. And one day there will be a reckoning.

But the first four seals and their four horsemen might not depict a final day of judgment. It may be that what we read here is similar to what Jesus said shortly before he died on the cross. This is what we read in Matthew 24:3–8:

³ As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” ⁴ And Jesus answered them, “See that no one leads you astray. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.”

Jesus had just said that the temple building in Jerusalem, which was so important to Judaism, was going to be destroyed (Matt. 24:1–2). His disciples ask when that would happen, and also when Jesus would come again and bring this age to an end. Jesus tells them that before the temple is destroyed, there will be false Messiahs, people who claim to be the Christ. Of course, Jesus is the real Messiah, but not everyone knows that, and these impostors will lead people astray. He says there will be wars and famines and earthquakes. But these are merely the beginning of birth pains. The birth comes later.

I interpret this passage to mean that in the first century, before the temple was destroyed in the year 70, these things happened. In fact, there have always been wars and famines and earthquakes, at least ever since sin entered into the world. There are always people who claim to represent God but don't and who lead others astray. But the destruction of the temple is a foreshadowing of the final judgment, and these events—false Christs, wars, earthquakes, famines—are typical of the age in which we live, an age that has lasted millennia. So, I think the four horsemen don't necessarily represent what will happen immediately before Jesus returns. The things they depict might be things that happen on an even grander scale right before Jesus returns. But they are things that happen throughout this age.

The first horseman rides a white horse. It may be that that this horseman is a Messianic pretender. After all, Jesus is depicted as coming on a white horse in Revelation 19:11. We're told that this rider is given a crown, and it seems that this is a case of the so-called “divine passive,”

which means that God gave him the crown. But that doesn't mean he is godly. In chapter 9, in the midst of another passage depicting judgment, we're told that locusts that are in some way like horses were wearing crowns (Rev. 9:7). So, the fact that this rider is wearing a crown doesn't mean he is good or has good intentions. This horseman makes war.

The second horseman rides a red horse, which is fitting, because he takes away peace and leads people to slay each other. He brings bloodshed. It's possible that he leads non-believers to persecute Christians, because the word translated here as "slay" is used elsewhere in Revelation to refer to the death of Jesus and his followers (Rev. 5:6, 9, 12; 6:9; 13:8; 18:24).

The third horseman brings famine. In the wake of war, food is in short supply and must be weighed on scales. The prices mentioned here are anywhere from eight to sixteen times their average price at that time. Famine and scarce food leads to inflation. The rich might be able to afford oil and wine, but the poor would suffer.

The final horseman is none other than Death, that pale rider. In his wake is Hades, the realm of the dead. Obviously, death and Hades are personified here. In the end of Revelation, they will be cast into the lake of fire. They will die (Rev. 20:13–14). But before then, they will destroy.

It may be that these four horsemen do their work all at the same time, or it may be that war leads to slaughter, which leads to famine, which brings even more death. What is clear is that Israel's covenant curses are universalized, or globalized. The curses are visited upon the faithful and the unfaithful, just as the covenant curses came upon the righteous remnant within Israel.

And yet these trials are all brought about by Jesus unsealing the scroll. They are under his control. It may be strange to think that Jesus would desire for such horrors to occur. But these trials are part of the punishment he brings against sin. All of us have sinned against God. It is only God's patient mercy that has kept him from destroying us all. God would be just to wipe us all out. If we were like Peter Hitchens, we would think of all of our misdeeds, from the embarrassing to the appalling, and we would know that we deserve condemnation. So, God is merciful to give us muted forms of judgment, like war and famine and even physical death. These painful things can lead to our salvation if we turn to Jesus.

And Jesus' death on the cross was an act of judgment and salvation. Jesus, though he never sinned, became sin in order that the sin of his people might be punished and that they

might become righteous (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus' death on the cross shows us the horror of our sin. It took nothing less than the death of the Son of God to rescue us from our sin. Jesus' death also heightens the guilt of those who refuse him. Those who reject Jesus do so even though he died for sinners. To reject Jesus is to reject the greatest gift of God. Such a rejection of God is evidence of our sin, the sin that God must and will condemn.

Let us continue reading this chapter of Revelation. We'll see another reason for God's judgment. Here are verses 9–11:

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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?" ¹¹ 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.

Verses 1–8 depict judgments on the whole earth, which affect unbeliever and believer alike. Here, only the suffering of the believers is mentioned. Since "slay" and "slain" was mentioned in verses 4 and 9, and "killed" is mentioned in verses 8 and 11, it's possible that these martyrs were killed as a result of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. At any rate, these people were "slain for the word of God for the witness they had borne." They were killed because they were Christians who spoke up. The fact that they are under the altar may mean that they are under the protection of Jesus' sacrifice. The altar may be the altar of incense, and we're told that the incense represents the prayers of the saints (Rev. 5:8; 8:3–4).

What are these souls praying for? They ask of God, "How long?" Specifically, they ask how long it will be before God judges, before he avenges their deaths. That cry of "How long" is often voiced in the Psalms (Pss. 6:3; 13:2; 35:17; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; 82:2; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3). The cry is often related to the presence of evil in the world. How long, God, will you let evil continue? How long until you rescue us? How long until you defeat our enemies? Psalm 74:10–11 is a good example of this:

¹⁰ How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?

Is the enemy to revile your name forever?

¹¹ Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand?

Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them!

God's answer to them is twofold: These martyrs are given white robes, which means they are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Their sins have been removed and they are pure in God's sight. They are also told to rest until the full number of the martyrs has been complete. It's strange to think that God has a plan for the exact number of people who will die for the faith. But God has a plan for everything. God is in control. Even when we don't understand everything, even when we don't know why God's plans would include such things, the fact is that God has a plan. Jesus will not return to this world to judge and to restore until God's appointed time.

I think that appointed time is depicted in the opening of the sixth seal. Let's read verses 12–17:

¹² 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, ¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴ The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ 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, ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

When the sixth seal is opened, there are some cosmic signs that something terrible is happening. These images are all drawn from various Old Testament passages delivered by the prophets (Isa. 13:10–13; 24:1–6, 19–23; 34:4; Ezek. 32:6–8; Joel 2:10, 30–31; 3:15–16; and Hab. 3:6–11.) These passages mention shaking of the earth or mountains, darkening or shaking of the moon, stars, sun, and/or heavens, and pouring out of blood. Isaiah 34:4 is a good example:

All the host of heaven shall rot away,
and the skies roll up like a scroll.
All their host shall fall,
as leaves fall from the vine,
like leaves falling from the fig tree.

I'm not sure that these descriptions of the heavens and earth are literal, but they are often used of when an empire falls to its enemies and they are used of the great day of the Lord. When Jesus returns, the empire of man will fall. When Jesus returns, it will be clear that God has come to judge. There will be very clear signs that this age has come to a close. The image of the sky coming to earth may represent God coming to earth. The image of the sky vanishing might

represent the fact that there will be no hiding from God's judgment. He knows everything we've ever thought, desired, or done. He knows all our sins. The images of fruit being shaken from a tree and from mountains and islands being removed seem to depict the idea that there will be a great shaking up of the status quo. Powers set against God will fall. Kingdoms will crumble. The earth will not be the same. God's judgment is depicted as decreation, an unraveling of creation. There will be nowhere to hide from God's judgment.

The point is that this is one picture of the final judgment. When we see a great earthquake (Rev. 11:13; 16:18), mountains and islands being removed (Rev. 16:20), the sky vanishing (Rev. 20:11), and judgments being issued from the throne (Rev. 16:17; 20:11), we are given pictures of Jesus' second coming. That's something really important to know about the book of Revelation. The book does not present one linear, chronological story. Instead, it gives us different images of the same reality. We are given different depictions of this age and its end. Some proof of this reality is that in this passage, the sun, moon, and stars seem to be removed or darkened and destroyed, yet they appear again Revelation 8:10, 12; 9:1; and 12:4. If Revelation were told in a chronological way, that would be contradictory or impossible. But Revelation isn't told in that way. This is one of several images of judgment and of Jesus' second coming.

We also know that because of the end of the chapter. In verse 15, all unbelievers try to hide from God's judgment. Both the rich and powerful and the poor and enslaved try to hide from God. This is just what the first humans did after they sinned. We try to run from God because we know we are guilty. These unbelievers are so afraid of God's wrath that they ask the mountains and the rocks to fall on them. (This is an allusion to Hos. 10:8.) But even if that happened, it wouldn't spare them God's wrath.

At the end of the chapter, these unbelievers who are trying to hide from God realize that the wrath of God and the Lamb, Jesus, has come. And they ask a very important question: who can stand? That's another question asked throughout the Bible. Psalm 76:7 says:

But you, you are to be feared!
Who can stand before you
when once your anger is roused?

Malachi 3:2 says: "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap." God is a refining fire who consumes all sin. How can sinners ever stand before that refining fire without getting burned?

Peter Hitchens understood this truth when he saw that depiction of the last judgment. He saw naked sinners unable to hide their sin. They were running from God, vomiting in fear, and descending to the pit of hell. He thought of his own sin and realized he deserved condemnation. If we were thinking rightly, we would understand these things.

But there is good news. We can come under the true altar, the cross, and find refuge. The one hiding place is Jesus. He came to live the perfect life that we don't live, fulfilling God's plans for humanity. He also came to die in our place, to absorb God's wrath, to take on the penalty that sin deserves. And he rose from the grave to demonstrate that he paid for that penalty in full, that he has power over sin and death, and that he is the Son of God. He has ascended into heaven, where he is right now, but he will come again for people, to bring them into a new creation where there is no pain and no death. But he will come to judge those who have rejected him. If we turn to Jesus now in faith, we can be spared that terrible wrath.

How do we turn to Jesus in faith? We understand that we have sinned against God, just the way that Peter Hitchens became aware of his sin. We are willing to follow Jesus wherever he leads. We are even willing to die for Jesus, should it come to that. What are you willing to die for? That question reveals what you treasure the most, what you're really putting your faith in.

My encouragement to you today is to put your trust in Jesus. Come under his altar. He has already endured judgment for his people. He's not just the Judge who slays, but the Savior who was judged and slain. He can be trusted.

If you are a Christian, continue to trust in Jesus. Know that these trials will come. It's not likely that we will die for being Christians, but it's possible. How do you prepare for that day? Continue to read the Bible, continue to pray, continue to be part of the body of Christ, not neglecting to meet together (Heb. 10:24–25). Know that there are no other saviors, no other shelters under which you can find refuge from God's wrath.

Jesus will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. Who can stand in that day of wrath? You can if you stand in Christ.