

**The Seven Seals (part 2)**  
*Seals 5 and 6*  
(Sermon 14 – Rev. 6:9-17)  
1.5.25

Please turn in your Bibles to Revelation chapter 6.

Back in chapter 5 John sees a scroll in the hand of God the Father – a scroll that contains the fulfillment of God’s redemptive plan: judgment for those who reject Christ, and reward for those who trust in Him. John describes this scroll as sealed with 7 seals.

Here in chapter 6, Jesus has taken the scroll, and he begins to break each of the 7 seals. And each time Jesus breaks a seal, something happens – a different judgment of God is revealed.

Last week we saw the first 4 seals broken, and great judgment is unleashed on the earth, in the form of four horsemen, bringing about global war, civil war, famine, disease and widespread death.

Now we come to the breaking of the fifth and sixth seal. Let’s read Rev. 6:9-17 and then we’ll pray...

***[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. [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?”***

***(Let's Pray)***

Studying Revelation is like going on a journey, or taking a hike through the woods. You have to prepare, and you have to take the right tools with you. If you were with us last week, you know we took time to gather up some helpful tools for our journey. Things like:

- Good books and commentaries (my list is posted online)
- Remembering how to interpret the timing of these events – some happened in the past, some are happening now, some will happen in the future.
- Remembering when we talk about “end times” we’re talking about the time between the first coming of Christ and His second coming. That means we are living in the end times right now, and have been for 2000 years.
- And just like a map shows you your destination, we want to keep our eyes on the goal and purpose of Revelation – and that is to show us Jesus. He is the focus, He is the hero, He is our map, our path, and our destination.

Now, taking these tools, Starting with Rev. 6, we are seeing a vision of the judgment of God, represented by seals on a scroll that Jesus Himself is breaking open. The four horsemen we read about last week, I believe some of that has already happened – there has been global war (on a few different occasions), civil war, widespread disease and famine. And I believe they will continue to happen - not only the passive consequence of sin, but also part of the active judgment of God marking the last days.

And that judgment is being portrayed in these chapters by three distinct symbols – seals on a scroll being broken, trumpets being blown, and bowls being poured out. They are all linked – either as three groups of events that happen one after the other chronologically, OR as three different descriptions of the same events, which is what I think is most likely the case.

I think that approach (seeing these three groups of judgments as mostly the same events with 3 different descriptions) is even more convincing as we get into the coming chapters and notice some similarities:

-the seals, the trumpets and the bowls are all divided into groups of 4 and then 3.

-each of the judgments is interrupted with a brief interlude.

-the closer you get to the 7<sup>th</sup> seal, the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet and the 7<sup>th</sup> bowl, you get closer to the coming of Christ, and these judgments increase in intensity.

And that's what we will see today, as we watch Jesus open the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> seals on this scroll of God's judgment. Two seals, two pictures: one is a picture of events in heaven, the other a picture of devastating judgment on the earth.

First, the picture in heaven, and the 5<sup>th</sup> seal...

### ***I. THE FIFTH SEAL – the Cry of the Martyrs***

***[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.***

Jesus opens the 5<sup>th</sup> seal on the scroll of God's judgment, and John sees the souls of the martyrs, all those who to this point in history have given their lives for the sake of Christ.

That word "soul" is used many times in the Bible to describe the part of our being that lives on after these bodies die. When a person dies, there is no in-between. There is no purgatory or spiritual waiting room. At the moment of death, our souls go to their destination – either to the eternal joys of Heaven, or to eternal punishment of Hell.

John sees these martyred souls as "under the altar" in heaven. In the OT Tabernacle, there were two distinct altars – the one *inside* the Tabernacle was called the altar of incense, representing the prayers of God's people. Then, there was the one *outside* the Tabernacle, called the brazen altar, where the bull or sheep was killed and the blood drained.

And in John's vision, this altar in heaven is meant to mold together both altars in the OT, pointing us to Jesus, as our mediator and our sacrifice. And just as blood was poured out at the base of the altar in the OT, the life of these Christians was poured out before God in the name of Christ.

The word for martyr in the Greek is the same word for "witness". These Christians were killed, John says, "***for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.***" They held to the testimony that Jesus is Lord, He is Messiah, the one and only Savior. They bore witness and held that good news to be more valuable than their own lives.

And as this fifth seal is broken by Jesus, these souls, these martyrs cry out to God...

***[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?"***

Their prayer is a cry for vindication, for God's justice to be enacted on those who have persecuted the Church and killed Christ-followers.

The martyrs are not demanding personal revenge. They are crying out for God's justice to come to pass. Concerning this connection, Robert Mounce writes this...

*"[The martyrs'] cry for vindication leads to the fundamental theological point of Revelation – that God will vindicate himself by vindicating his people."*

Hear that truth – God will vindicate himself by vindicating his people. Those two are connected. Just another way to see God's mercy and His justice linked together.

Speaking of that, it's important for us to remember, especially as we walk through these chapters in Revelation, that while God's judgment is terrible and fearful, it is never unjust. God is always just. To *withhold* any part of His judgment for any period of time is mercy. But it is completely just for God to judge the earth as He does in these verses. What should amaze us is that God is patient with any of us, that He saves any of us.

These martyrs know that God's justice is good and right and perfect. And as some of the psalms reflect, they ask God the question, "How long?"

***[11] Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer...***

So, in response to their cry for justice, they were given white robes, which represent purity and righteousness, as well as reward and victory. God assures them His judgment is soon to come, to rest for now, to be comforted.

Not only were they comforted, but they were also given an answer as to “How long”, or “When, Lord, will you judge the world?” The martyrs were told that God would withhold His judgment (the rest of v. 11)...

***“..until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.”***

This part of v.11 is key in helping us interpret the rest of Revelation. This verse tells us:

1. God has ordained Christian martyrdom. Christians dying for the faith does not mean the devil is winning. It means God’s perfect will is coming to pass.
2. God has ordained a set number of Christian martyrs. The attack on the church is and will be relentless, but not forever. God has set limits. And He knows and has ordained the exact number of those who will die for the name of Christ.
3. And, that set number of martyrs will be met before God brings full and complete judgment on the earth. Not exactly the answer of a date and time for the end of the world that we mistakenly look for in Revelation. But it shows us there *is* a definite time, pre-ordained by God, and that all will come to pass just as He has planned.

All of this points to God’s complete sovereignty over all things. He is in control.

Dennis Johnson, in his commentary on Revelation, writes this...

***“Accompanying the world-wide spread of God’s good news...is the prolonged affliction of the church that bears this joyful message. The days on God’s calendar are marked off, one by one, in the blood of the martyrs.” – Dennis Johnson***

This has real implications on our lives right now. For instance, when God says there's a set number of martyrs that will die, that means Christians will go through tribulation. We will be present on the earth and go through many afflictions and persecutions before Christ returns.

According to v. 11, there will be no rescue of the church until all those who are predestined to die for Christ have been martyred. Then, the end will come. Then, Christ will return and exact judgment on the earth.

This challenges our notion that Jesus' return will somehow prevent the church from going through any of these trials and the darkness to come. If we live life thinking we'll be rescued from suffering to come, we will be ill-prepared to suffer well.

But we must realize that our spiritual growth now is not only preparation to leave, but it is preparation to live. To endure. To be faithful and not fearful. To face trial and hardship with hope and unshakable joy that only Christ can provide.

Now, stop and consider all of this from the perspective of the original audience, those Christians of the 7 churches in Asia. They had watched their loved ones die at the hands of Rome. They had seen their friends and family members torn apart by wild animals in the Colosseum. Hear these verses with ears of those who were likely facing their own martyrdom in a matter of days or weeks.

These verses were preparing them for their own death. This account of the martyrs crying out for justice rang in the hearts of the persecuted church back then, and it should bring great comfort for the persecuted church today – that God Himself hears their cries. He sees their suffering, He sees the sacrifice of those laying down their lives to honor their Lord. And it is beautiful in His sight.

Now, let me ask you, how do these verses land on you? For those who were taught – like I was – to anchor all your end-times hope in the rapture of the church to get us out of here and miss all the suffering and death to come, shouldn't this redirect that hope, and in fact deepen that hope?

So, instead of preparing for an escape, these verses prepare us to endure. It seems impossible to imagine now, but these verses are to prepare us as well in case we have to lay down our lives for Christ as well.

**That** will change how you live your life, what you prioritize, how you raise your kids, how you spend your time, how you spend your money, how you view missions...when you see your life as a preparation to be a martyr.

In case that seems too far-fetched, remember what Jesus said for all who following Him...

*And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:38-39)*

This command to pick up our cross, I think we can be too quick to make to be symbolic, or a figure of speech. While it's true not every Christian will be asked to literally die for Christ, many will be. And none of those deaths are accidental, nor are they incidental. Each martyr is numbered. Each one seen by God, each one treasured by God as a holy sacrifice, following the One True Sacrifice – Jesus Christ.

Are you ready if you are among that number? I hope so. I hope I am ready if that is my call. That question cuts through all the lukewarm spirituality, all the nominal Christianity. To pick up your cross, you must lay down the treasuring of this life. You cannot carry both.

And whether we live or die for Christ, may we join in the prayer for God's justice on behalf of all the martyrs who have paid the ultimate price to follow Him.

(Transition): Now, in response to the martyrs' question, "How long?" Jesus now breaks open the 6<sup>th</sup> seal, and we see the martyr's prayers answered with fearful judgment of God unleashed on the earth...

## **II. THE SIXTH SEAL – (Cosmic Destruction)**

***[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.***

The Bible promises that when Christ returns to set up His kingdom, there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Here we see the beginning stages of destruction of the old heavens and the old earth.

One element of God's judgment is a great earthquake. We know several of the churches Revelation was written to, had experienced two devastating earthquakes in the first century. They knew first hand what kind of death and destruction an earthquake could cause. But that was nothing compared to what John is describing here. This great earthquake was meant to communicate the removal of all stability - everything is being shaken, everything is coming apart.

In addition to the earthquake, John describes the sun being blackened, the moon had a red appearance like blood, and stars fell from sky. In ancient times, not only did they depend on these heavenly bodies for navigation and sustaining life itself, but also for some measure of spiritual comfort. To see the sun rise and set, to see the moon and stars light up the night, all of that was an assurance of God's sovereignty and a sign of God's blessing.

So with these signs, even though we are to understand them in a symbolic way, it is clear that God's blessing has now been removed, and God's judgment has come.

This kind of judgment was foretold by the OT prophets...

*Isaiah 34:4 - 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.*

*Joel 2:31 - The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.*

Then in the NT, when Jesus was teaching the crowd on the Mount of Olives, He said this in Mark 13...

*And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains. (Mark 13:7-8)*



All of these signs of destruction, Jesus says, are but the beginning. They are the precursor to the coming of the Lord and His full judgment upon all who reject Christ.

Now, with this kind of massive destruction and chaos, how will the people on earth respond? That's what we see next in John's vision...

***[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,***

Notice that John first points to the reactions of the rich and powerful. That shows us:

1) Even kings cannot trust in their wealth / power as protection from God's judgment. No amount of money or power can make you right with God, nor shelter you from the wrath to come.

2) This is God's answer to the prayer of the martyrs. Some of these kings and those in power would include those who persecuted the church and ordered the killing of those martyrs crying out to God. Here, God is vindicating His name by vindicating His people.

But we also see more than just the rich and powerful being affected. The judgment of God also includes the slave and the free and everyone. This reminds us that being poor or oppressed does not automatically make you saved. Rich or poor, there is one Savior for us all – Jesus Christ. Trust in Him, repent of your sins and live for Christ and be saved from the coming wrath. But all who reject Him – young or old, rich or poor, slave or free – will face the terrible judgment to come.

And that's who is crying out in these verses - unbelievers who rejected Christ in this life. When God's judgment begins to be poured out, they all run for shelter, into the caves and 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..."***

Notice the ones on earth who rejected Christ, they are not simply trying to hide from judgment. They are crying out for death. They would rather face death than God's judgment. What they didn't realize, was they would face both.

Again, Jesus said this would happen. While He was carrying His cross to Golgotha, Jesus looks at the crowd around Him and says,

*“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’”*  
(Luke 23:28-30)

And here in Rev. 6, the chapter ends with a penetrating question.

***[17] for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”***

Who can survive the wrath of the Lamb? Who can make it through this kind of judgment and destruction?

Without Christ as Savior, the answer is – no one. Not a single person.

Many people will be surprised on that day.

- People who grew up in church but never lived for Christ.
- People who thought being a Christian meant just being “spiritual” but not following Scripture.
- People who thought it was all about just trying to be a good person and do nice things for others, and surely God would let you into heaven.
- Or people who went to church every time the doors were opened, went through the motions, smiled and played the part of the Christian, but never fully surrendered their lives to Christ.

Jesus said, “Many on that day will say to me Lord, Lord. Didn’t we do this or that in your name, but I will say I never knew you. Depart from me.”

So, who can stand and survive God’s judgment? The answer: only those who trust in Christ. Those who have bowed the knee to Christ, who have confessed their sins and trusted on the only one who can save and forgive and cleanse and make us righteous before a holy God.

Again Robert Mounce helps us with this timely reminder...

*“The faithful are to live with the assurance that God is in command of his universe. At the moment it may appear that the forces of evil have gained the edge, but the one who defeated those very forces*

*by means of his sacrificial death on the cross will return at the end of time to claim his own people and destroy forever all that stands in opposition.” ~Robert Mounce*

Church, take heart in that glorious truth – that every person who places their trust in Jesus Christ and His finished work on the cross, you are saved from the coming judgment. You have been saved, you are being saved, and you will be saved.

### **Conclusion / Application**

In the end, everyone will know Christ – you will know Him either as Loving Savior now, or you will experience Him as the Fearful Judge then.

If you are here this morning, and you know you haven't been living for Christ, this is your wake-up call. Perhaps there is someone here today who has recently prayed, "God if you're real, please show me." Today He is showing you. God showing you His mercy by revealing the judgment to come.

Or maybe you are here today and you have told others that you're a Christian, but you would honestly confess that your life doesn't reflect that. The Holy Spirit is convicting you right now, calling you to repent and turn to Jesus and surrender your life fully to Him.

And if you are here this morning and you are a Christian, you have dedicated your life to Christ and lean on His grace everyday to live for Him, these verses are here to encourage you. They are here to remind us of what the Lord told Isaiah...

*“For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you.*  
~ Isaiah 54:10

And even if you are among those numbers that will be martyred for Christ, to give up this life is but a small sacrifice to inherit the eternal joys that God has in store for us.

Until then, let us be a people prepared to die for Christ by being a people who live for Him.

***(Let's Pray)***