

The Beginning of the Great Day of God's Wrath

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon explores the significance of the seven-sealed book and the events that unfold as the seals are opened, leading to the climax of God's wrath in the tribulation period.

Scripture: Matthew 24:6, John 3:18, Revelation 6:1-12

Topics: "End Times", "Divine Judgment"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the book of Revelation, explaining the significance of the opening of the seals in Chapter 6 as a progression towards the end of the age. The seals reveal a future event after the Church is caught up to glory, indicating a time of terrible judgments on earth. The interpretation of these events is intertwined with the understanding of the translation of the church and the timing of the great tribulation. The seals, trumpets, and vials are seen as concentrated prophecies of a period of divine judgment and great tribulation before the second coming of Christ. The chapter culminates in a vivid description of divine wrath and judgment, prompting reflection on the impending end times and the need for repentance and faith in Christ.

Transcript

The opening of chapter 6 of the book of Revelation marks an important milestone in the progressive revelation of the end of the age. In chapter 5 John is introduced to the seven-sealed book in the hand of Christ. In chapter 6 the first six seals are opened with the resultant tremendous events occurring in the earth. The interpretation of these events depends upon the understanding of other portions of the prophetic Word. If the events portrayed are taken in any literal sense, it should be clear that they describe an event yet future, in the words of Christ "the things which shall be hereafter" (1:19). Van Ryn expresses the common pretribulational position:

The opening of the seals ushers in the terrible judgments to fall upon this earth after the Church has been caught up to glory, as we saw in chap. 4:1.141

The events here revealed also depend for their interpretation on the question of whether a translation of the church has already taken place. Though the book of Revelation itself does not determine this important question with finality, it is significant that the church so prominent in chapters 2 and 3 is not mentioned again until 22:16 except as the wife of the Lamb at the close of the tribulation. Nowhere in scenes of earth which describe the end time (chaps. 6-19) is the church pictured as involved in the earthly struggle. Further, the hope of the rapture mentioned to the church of Thyatira and the church at

Philadelphia does not appear in the detailed prophetic program which unfolds in the book of Revelation. This lends credence to the conclusion that the rapture of the church has occurred before the events pictured beginning with chapter 4.

Expositors of the book of Revelation usually agree that there is some relation between the events at the end of the age and Daniel's seventieth week, to be understood as the last seven years of Israel's program prophesied in Daniel 9:27. Many have assumed that the events of earth in chapters 6 through 19 coincide with the seven years of Israel's program culminating in the second coming of Christ. Expositors of this point of view have usually taken for granted that the book gives a panoramic view of the entire seven years even though there is no explicit proof of this in the book itself. There is some evidence, however, that the events pictured in the seals, trumpets, and vials are instead a concentrated prophecy of the latter half of this week, i.e., a period of three and one-half years, designated as a time of wrath and the great tribulation, and constituting the introduction to the second coming of Christ. Evidence for this is presented as the exposition unfolds.

There is a remarkable similarity between the progress of chapter 6 as a whole and the description given by our Lord of the end of the age in Matthew 24:4-31. In both passages the order is (1) war (Matt. 24:6-7; Rev. 6:3-4), (2) famine (Matt. 24:7; Rev. 6:5-6), (3) death (Matt. 24:7-9; Rev. 6:7-8), (4) martyrdom (Matt. 24:9-10, 16-22; Rev. 6:9-11), (5) the sun darkened, the moon darkened, and the stars falling (Matt. 24:29; Rev. 6:12-14), (6) a time of divine judgment (Matt. 24:32-25:26; Rev. 6:15-17). The general features of Matthew 24 are obviously quite parallel to the events of the book of Revelation beginning in chapter 6.¹⁴²

It is inevitable therefore that any exposition of Revelation must have presuppositions based upon a study of the entire Word of God and involving the question as to whether prophecy should be interpreted with the same degree of literalness as other portions of Scripture. Though Revelation abounds in signs and symbols, it was intended to be interpreted with far greater literalness than has been commonly exercised. Such an approach yields a remarkable revelation of the end of the age which coincides with other prophetic revelation.

The picture before us, in a word, is God's revelation of the dramatic and terrible judgment which will climax the present age. This constitutes a warning to those who are living carelessly in unbelief to beware lest this age engulf them. The prophecy of the end of the age is a spur to Christians to snatch souls as brands from the burning and thus prepare them for the coming of the Lord.

The First Seal (6:1-2)

6:1-2 And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see. And I saw, and behold, a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

As the first seal is opened, John in his vision hears the noise of thunder, a symbolic token of a coming storm. On a warm summer day one can hear thunder in the distance even though the sun is still shining where he is. The approaching dark clouds and the roar of the thunder presage the beginning of the storm.

It is important to note that the revelation here given indicates a succession of events, though not all expositors have agreed on this conclusion. Lange, for instance, holds that the seals, trumpets, and vials are a symbolic presentation of the whole of human history.¹⁴³ The six seals seem to unfold successively in a chronological pattern. Out of the seventh seal will come another series of seven trumpets and out of

the seventh trumpet will come another series of seven vials or bowls of the wrath of God.¹⁴⁴ Different actors are prominent, namely, the Lamb opening the seal, the angels sounding the trumpets, and God Himself pouring out the vials. Actually, however, the seven seals comprehend the whole, as all the trumpets and all the vials are comprehended in the seventh seal. The seven-sealed book therefore is the comprehensive program of God culminating in the second coming of Christ.

John Cumming presents a typical historical interpretation of the seals, trumpets, and vials in these words:

The first six seals contain the history of the temporal glory and decline of Rome Pagan, the most illustrious empire of the ancient earth. This is my strong, and I think demonstrable conviction. The first six trumpets, which are comprehended in the seventh seal, contain the desolation of Rome Christian by the Goths, the Saracens, and the Turks. The first six vials, which are comprehended in the seventh trumpet, embody the events that occurred subsequent to the breaking forth of the great European revolution in 1793. Thus the twenty-one apocalyptic symbols, the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven vials, represent in succession the progress of the church along the obstructions of time, her vicissitudes of experience, her trials, her cruel mockings, her perils, and her final triumph and permanent prosperity, contemporaneously with overwhelming judgments on the nations, and on the apostasy.¹⁴⁵

Cumming, though following the historical school, believes in the pre-millennial return of Christ and the futuristic character of the latter portion of the book of Revelation. Of special interest is his chapter "Signs of the Second Advent" among which signs he names satanic unbelief. He states, "I believe that one-half of the professors of the gospel are nothing better than practical infidels."¹⁴⁶ He also names as signs the selfishness and increment of sin manifested in the present world, the increase and spread of popery, the continued hope of the Jews for a national home and their hope for their Messiah (even in the mid-nineteenth century), the efforts on the part of men at self-regeneration, the increase in knowledge, increase in the activity of Satan, the increase of systems of error, great judgments upon the earth, the growth in apathy and unbelief concerning the second coming.¹⁴⁷

The decision to reject the historical school of interpretation (of which Cumming is a member), in favor of the futuristic approach is most important in understanding the subsequent chapters of the book of Revelation. While many arguments can be cited pro and con, the final choice must be based upon the judgment as to which provides the most sensible and self-consistent interpretation of the book of Revelation. The historical school as well as any which tends to spiritualize much of the book does not meet the test of providing such a self-consistent interpretation. At least fifty different systems of interpretation have arisen from the historical view alone. While even in the futurist school minor variations will be found in various expositors, the general conclusion that these chapters picture future definite events is the important coherent factor. The subsequent exposition of Revelation must be its own proof that the futuristic school provides a sensible explanation of the major events prophesied in the book. Many of the historical interpretations have already been proved false by historical developments. The ultimate proof of the futuristic interpretation will be in future events.

At the noise of thunder, John is invited by one of the four living creatures to come and see. Some texts omit the "and see." In verse 2 John repeats the expression "And I saw" of verse 1, as if to emphasize the sight he beholds. He further adds the word behold, indicating the startling character of the vision. What he sees is described as a white horse on which a man is sitting carrying a bow. The rider, to whom a crown is given, is pictured as going forth conquering and to conquer.

Stauffer traces the symbolism of the four horses to the custom of having four teams of horses in the races which were a part of the elaborate celebrations which characterized the reign of Domitian.¹⁴⁸ The idea, though interesting, does not do much to explain the eschatological significance of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse.

No explanation is given of this vision. In many cases the reader of Revelation is not left to his own ingenuity but is given the meaning of what is beheld. Here as in many other instances, however, the appeal is to a general knowledge of Scripture. In this instance, because there is no specific interpretation of the vision, more diverse explanations have been given of verse two than probably any other portion of the entire book.

Of the many possibilities two stand out as worthy of mention. Some believe the rider of the white horse is none other than Christ Himself.¹⁴⁹ This is characteristic of the historical school of interpretation which regards the Revelation as history rather than prophecy. However, some of this school regard this scene as future and as picturing Christ as the ultimate Victor of the ages. A more plausible explanation is that the rider of the white horse is none other than the "prince that shall come" of Daniel 9:26, who is to head up the revived Roman Empire and ultimately become the world ruler. Ainslie believes the rider of the white horse will appear at the beginning of the seventieth week of Daniel and that the rider himself "is the Roman prince of an empire that must rise again to fulfill the great prophecies of the book of Daniel."¹⁵⁰ He is Satan's masterpiece and the counterfeit of all that Christ is or claims to be. He is therefore cast in the role of a conqueror, which seems to be the significance of the white horse.

Jennings states,

The whole context and character of these seals absolutely forbid our thinking of this rider being the Lord Jesus, as so many affirm. His reign shall not bring war, famine, and strife in its train.¹⁵¹

Jennings believes that the riders are personifications, not individuals, and that the first rider "may be the personification of government or rule in the last days in the hands of Gentiles."¹⁵²

In biblical times it was customary for a conqueror to ride in triumph on a white horse. In the symbolization of Revelation 19 Christ Himself is pictured as riding on a white horse leading the armies of heaven to the earth. To hold that the rider in 6:2 is Christ Himself, however, is out of order chronologically, for Christ comes on a white horse not at the beginning but at the end of the tribulation.

Beckwith states that although

the first rider unquestionably symbolizes the victorious warrior, ... it is hardly conceivable that Christ should be represented here as the Lamb in the court of heaven breaking the seal and at the same time by that act revealing himself as a figure coming into view from another quarter and in another form in response to a summons from an archangel... The first rider, like the three others, is a personification of a judgment to be sent upon the earth.¹⁵³

While the dispute as to the identity of the rider cannot be finally settled, especially in the brief compass of this discussion, the conclusion identifying him as the world ruler of the tribulation, the same individual described as the beast out of the sea in Revelation 13, is preferred.

Tatford, after a survey of possible interpretations, concludes:

The brilliant career of this imperial rider on the white horse has been interpreted by the historicists as applying to the golden age of prosperity and good government that elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. It is far more probable, however, that the reference is to the rise and career of a mighty imperial ruler after the rapture of the Church, who brings under his sway a vast territory in an endeavour to maintain peace, order, and prosperity.¹⁵⁴

Commentators have noted the description of the rider. He is pictured as having a bow, symbol of distant victory, but no mention is made of the arrows. This has been construed as indicating a bloodless victory, but this interpretation cannot be dogmatically held. He is, however, given a crown, that is, the crown of a victor (Gr., Stephanos), not the crown of a sovereign. The emphasis is not so much on his authority as on his victory, as confirmed by the latter part of verse 2, where he is said to go forth conquering and to conquer. Though he is in fact destined to be a world ruler, the emphasis is on the temporary victory which is his.

Stevens notes that at this point in Revelation the scene refers to the tribulation period preceding the coming of Christ:

From what has already been plainly found, the time here is that of the earliest stage of Anti-Christ's times. It has been learned from 2 Thess. 2:7-8 that his open revelation succeeds the removal from the earth of the restraining agency of the overcoming saints. And from Dan. 7:8, 20; 8:9; and 11:40-43, it is made plain that Anti-Christ first conducts in the earth a period of sweeping, victorious warfare. The field of conflict will be the territories of the restored northern (Syrian), southern (Egyptian), and eastern (Mesopotamian) kingdoms of the old Grecian Empire. The figure of a white horse, and of his rider seated erect with drawn bow and with victor's wreath upon his brow, is the favorite oriental symbol of the military conqueror.¹⁵⁵

Peake, who finds the second, third, and fourth riders respectively meaning war, famine, and pestilence, says of the first rider:

The problem of the first rider remains. Since in xix. II, when heaven is opened, Christ comes forth to make war, seated on a white horse, many interpreters have identified the first rider with Him. It is not impossible that Christ, who opens the seal which is the signal for the rider to appear, should Himself be the rider who obeys the summons. It is, however, most improbable in itself. Moreover it brings Him on the scene much too early; for it is not till a very late point in the development that He enters on His victorious career. This identification should therefore be set aside without hesitation.

Peake goes on to identify the first rider with the Parthians, which is most unlikely, though not an uncommon interpretation.¹⁵⁶

The Second Seal: War (6:3-4)

6:3-4 And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see. And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.

As the Lamb opens the second seal of the seven-sealed book, the second living creature invites John to come and see. Some texts leave off the expression "and see" in this instance, as well as in verse 1. John in this case observes another horse described as red and bearing a rider to whom power is given to take peace from the earth and to cause men to kill one another. As a symbol of this, he is given a great sword.

Clyde C. Cox suggests not only that the rider on the white horse is the world's political ruler but that the rider on the red horse is his associate, the false prophet. He finds support in that red is "typical of the beast kingdom,"¹⁵⁷ and cites the red dragon of Revelation 12:3, the scarlet beast, and the woman in scarlet of Revelation 17:3-4. The difficulty with this interpretation is that it does not properly account for the riders on the third and fourth horses.

If the first seal is a period of peace, as some have held, though this seems to be contradicted by the fact that the rider of the first horse conquers, in any case when the second seal is broken, military warfare breaks out and peace is taken from the world. The constant tension among nations and the ambitions of men have their climax in this period before Christ comes. Though "wars and rumours of wars" (Matt. 24:6) are characteristic of the age, it is evident that warfare occupies a large place in the consummation of the age with a resultant great loss of life. There apparently is a series of wars, the greatest of which is under way at the time of the second coming. The hope of permanent peace by means of the United Nations and other human efforts is doomed to failure.

The Third Seal: Famine (6:5-6)

6:5-6 And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.

In verses 5 and 6 the aftermath of war is seen and a great famine is revealed. In his vision John hears the third living creature invite him to come and see. John records that he sees a black horse and one sitting on the horse with a pair of balances in his hand used to weigh different commodities. A voice is heard from the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine."

In order to determine the meaning of this vision it must be understood that the silver coin designated as a penny is actually the Roman denarius, worth about fifteen cents. In the wage scale of that time it was common for a person to receive one denarius for an entire day's work. For such a coin, one measure of wheat or three measures of barley could be purchased in the vision here.

The explanation seems to be this: A measure of wheat is approximately what a laboring man would eat in one meal. If he used his penny to buy barley, a cheaper grain, he would have enough from an entire day's wages to buy three good meals of barley. If he bought wheat, a more precious grain, he would be able to buy enough for only one meal. There would be no money left to buy other things, such as oil or wine, which were considered essential in biblical times. To put it in ordinary language, the situation would be such that one would have to spend a day's wages for a loaf of bread with no money left to buy anything else. The symbolism therefore indicates a time of famine when life will be reduced to the barest necessities; for famine is almost always the aftermath of war. The somber picture is emphasized by the color of the horse, black being the symbol of suffering (cf. Lam. 5:10).

The Fourth Seal: Death (6:7-8)

6:7-8 And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger,

and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

With the opening of the fourth seal a dramatic picture of divine judgment upon the world is unfolded. In some manuscripts the invitation is simply "come" with the omission of "and see." However, John is obviously invited to witness the scene. He introduces the vision with the same dramatic expression he uses in verse 2, "I looked, and behold," indicating that what he sees again startles him. He describes a horse on which Death is the rider and which Hell, or Hades, follows. The horse is an unearthly color described as "pale," literally a pale green, like young vegetation, the same word being used to describe the color of the grass in Mark 6:39 and Revelation 8:7; 9:4. In the context it is a ghastly color. The rider is pictured as Death and the aftermath of his ride, or that which follows, as Hades, the abode of the dead. In keeping with this startling picture, it is revealed to John that this rider has power over one-fourth part of the earth, to kill with the sword, hunger, and the beasts of the earth. The area covered by this judgment, described as the earth (Gr., *ge*), though sometimes used only of the promised land given Israel, is a general word referring to the inhabited world and in this context apparently extends to the entire earth.

Following the historical school of interpretation, David N. Lord suggests that the rider on the first horse represents the true minister of the gospel. The rider on the second horse, who takes peace from the earth, represents the succession of Roman rulers in early Christian centuries, many of whom were usurpers. The rider of the third seal represents the excessive taxation of the Roman Empire. The fourth seal represents Roman rulers who destroyed by execution and famine those who opposed them. The strained nature of such interpretation is apparent, and there is no real support in the text for it.¹⁵⁸

McIlvaine makes the penetrating observation that the authority given to the riders of the four horses to kill with sword, famine, death, and wild beasts extends to all four equally or as a group. This would make impossible identifying the first rider as Christ and the succeeding riders as forces of evil, but would tie them together. McIlvaine says,

It is in these words that we find our Seer's interpretation of the first seal...it would be very surprising that no one seems ever to have thought of reading this closing statement as a paragraph by itself, and consequently as referring, not exclusively to the last, but to all of these four seals... Here, then, according to the Seer's own interpretation, this rider upon a white horse, with a crown and bow, and called forth by the lion-like living creature, is the symbol of the plague of wild beasts ... all the members of a class must be of the same sort, so that they can be obtained by one principle of analysis; and this principle in three of these, war, pestilence, and famine, is that of a judgment or scourge; consequently, in the remaining one, that of the first seal, it must be a judgment or scourge; otherwise the laws of thought are violated in the classification.¹⁵⁹

Though McIlvaine's historical interpretation of this passage as having been fulfilled in the early centuries of the Christian era should be considered inadequate, his observation that these four seals form a unit has a good deal of merit and would seem to forbid making Christ the rider on the white horse.

By any standard of comparison this is an awesome judgment. If one-fourth of the world population is destroyed in the fourth seal, it would represent the greatest destruction of human life ever recorded in history. The population of the human race in Noah's day undoubtedly was far less than the figure here cited as dying. If such a judgment would fall upon a world population of approximately three billion people, it would mean that seven hundred and fifty million would die. Treated geographically it would be equivalent to the destruction of more than the entire population of Europe and South America. It should be clear from

this description that the divine judgments being meted out to the earth are not trivial in character but describe a period of world history awful beyond any words, a period without precedent in its character and extent.

The fact that this devastating judgment comes at this stage in the revelation casts light on the important problem of determining when in the sequence of Revelation the great tribulation predicted by our Lord and Saviour (Matt. 24:15-26) begins in relationship to the seal judgments.

If the revelation of the final stage of Israel's predicted program be considered future, as recorded in Daniel 9:27, the last seven years or the seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy will immediately precede the second coming of Christ. According to Daniel 9:27 it is divided into two halves: the first three and one-half years are a period in which Israel is apparently protected under a covenant with the Gentile world ruler, the prince mentioned in Daniel 9:26. By contrast, however, Daniel indicates that the last three and one-half years cover an entirely different situation, one in which there is unprecedented trouble. In this period Israel becomes the object of persecution instead of being protected from her enemies.

The Prophet Daniel speaks of this period again when he predicts in Daniel 12:1:

And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book.

Jeremiah the prophet refers to the same event in Jeremiah 30:7 when he declares, "Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob's trouble, but he shall be saved out of it."

Other Old Testament passages bear witness to the awful character of this future time of trouble (cf. Joel 2:1-3). Inasmuch as the judgment described in the fourth seal is unparalleled, it seems to correspond with greater accuracy to the latter half of Daniel's seventieth week than to the earlier half and for that reason must be the time of great tribulation which Christ declared would exceed by far anything the world had previously known.

So great will be the trial of that period that Christ exhorted those living in Palestine at that time to flee to the mountains to escape their persecutors:

For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened (Matt. 24:21-22).

If the supreme mark of this great tribulation is unprecedented trouble, the fourth seal certainly qualifies as describing this period. Though some expositors believe the great tribulation does not begin until chapter 11, on the basis of this evidence, some have come to the conclusion that the great tribulation must begin much earlier, possibly as early as the first seal of Revelation 6. Though the book of Revelation itself does not state specifically what event begins the great tribulation, the characteristics unfolded in the fourth seal would indicate the great tribulation is underway at the time. The wars and famines predicted in the second and third seals are not unfamiliar events in the history of the world, but never before since the time of Noah has a judgment so devastating been consummated as to destroy one-fourth of the earth's population at one stroke.

Though it is impossible to settle this question conclusively, some believe that the rider on the white horse in the first seal is a picture of the prince (Dan. 9:26) at that stage in his career where he assumes control over the entire world (Dan. 7:23; Rev. 13:7), which seems to coincide with the beginning of the great tribulation. Though he comes as a pseudo prince of peace who will bring order to a troubled world, the peace is short-lived and is followed by war, famine, and death, as well as the devastating judgments of God recorded later in the book of Revelation. The fifth and sixth seals advance the narrative and describe the period specifically as "the great day of his wrath" (6:17), which almost certainly is a reference to the great tribulation.

From this introduction to the judgments portrayed in the book of Revelation, it should be evident that the world is facing a time of trouble such as man has never known before. The dream of the optimist for a world becoming increasingly better scientifically, intellectually, morally, and religiously does not fit the pattern of God's prophetic Word. The ultimate triumph of God is assured; and as the book of Revelation makes plain, Christ will reign over the earth and bring in a kingdom of peace and righteousness after the time of trouble has run its course. First, however, there must be the awful time of the great tribulation.

There is much in the modern world which seems to portend just such a period. The introduction of modern means of warfare with new capacity to destroy life and property, the shrinking of the world by rapid transportation, and the invention of modern weapons of war make all the earth vulnerable to such scenes of devastation and destruction of human life in the event of a world conflict. The darkness of the human hour is in sharp contrast to the bright hope of the imminent return of Christ for His church as an event preceding the time of trouble.

The Fifth Seal: The Martyred Souls in Heaven (6:9-11)

6:9-11 And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And when they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.

In the fifth seal the scene shifts from earth to heaven and John sees a vision of those who will be martyred for their faith in Christ. They are described as being under the altar, in keeping with the fact that the blood of the sacrifices of the Old Testament was poured out under the altar (Exodus 29:12; Lev. 4:7). In this case it is the "souls of them that were slain for the Word of God" which are seen under the altar. John hears them crying with a loud voice asking why God has not judged their persecutors.

The introduction of these martyred dead in heaven at this point immediately after the fourth seal seems to imply that these martyrs have come from the tribulation scene on the earth. There have been many martyrs in every generation, and even in the twentieth century tens of thousands have died for Christ in Asia, Africa, Central America, and South America. There are several reasons, however, for believing that a greater period of martyrdom is yet ahead. If the church has already been raptured, the dead in Christ have been raised from the dead before the time pictured here, and those pictured do not include the martyrs of the present dispensation.

In the fact that the martyrs ask for judgment upon those that dwell on the earth it is apparent that their persecutors are still living. Their cry for righteous judgment is in the same spirit as the Psalmist's call to God to vindicate His holiness and righteousness in dealing with the injustice and oppression which

characterize the human race. In answer to their question as to how long it will be, the reply is given in verse 11 that there is still a little time required for the fulfillment of God's program, that other events must take place, that still additional martyrs must be added to their number. In a word, they are to wait until the time of Christ's return in power and glory when God will deal in summary judgment with the earth.

The revelation of the fifth seal makes clear that in the future time of tribulation it will be most difficult to declare one's faith in the Lord Jesus. It may very well be that the majority of those who trust Christ as Saviour in that day will be put to death. This is confirmed in chapter 7 where another picture of the martyred dead of the tribulation is given, and in chapter 13 where death is inflicted on all who will not worship the beast. Martyrdom in those days will be as common as it is uncommon today. Thousands will be martyred, sealing their testimony with their own blood. Those who trust in Christ in that day will be forced to stand the acid test of being faithful even unto death.

In verse 11 it is revealed that the white robes given unto every one of the martyrs are symbolic of righteousness. This introduces another question often debated by theologians, namely, what kind of a body will saints have in heaven before their own bodies are raised from the dead? If the martyred dead here pictured are those who have come from the tribulation, it is clear that they will not receive their resurrection bodies until the end of the tribulation, according to Revelation 20:4. Scholars have been divided as to whether saints who die receive temporary bodies in heaven prior to the resurrection body, or whether only their spiritual beings are in heaven before the resurrection.

In this verse there is a contribution to an answer to this question. The martyred dead here pictured have not been raised from the dead and have not received their resurrection bodies. Yet it is declared that they are given robes. The fact that they are given robes would almost demand that they have a body of some kind. A robe could not hang upon an immaterial soul or spirit. It is not the kind of body that Christians now have, that is, the body of earth; nor is it the resurrection body of flesh and bones of which Christ spoke after His own resurrection. It is a temporary body suited for their presence in heaven but replaced in turn by their everlasting resurrection body given at the time of Christ's return.

The introduction of these martyred saints in heaven also has bearing upon the chronology of chapter 6. In support of the common interpretation that the seals cover the entire seven years of Daniel's seventieth week (Dan. 9:27), it is sometimes pointed out that two classes of martyrs are here mentioned, namely, those already slain, and those who are yet to be slain. It has been inferred, accordingly, that those previously slain were killed in the first half of Daniel's seventieth week whereas those who are yet to be slain will perish in the great tribulation or the last half of the week, as A. C. Gaebelein suggests.¹⁶⁰ Confirmation is found in the expression "for a little season" in verse 11 (Gr., *eti chronon mikron*).

There is no reason, however, why the last three and a half years could not have the same distinction, namely, certain martyrs at the beginning as contrasted to martyrs at the end. The ultimate decision depends on more weighty matters, namely, whether there is unprecedented tribulation prior to the fifth seal as seems to be clearly indicated in this context, and the fact that the book of Revelation never speaks of a seven-year period, only of a period of three and a half years, forty-two months, or a similar designation. The ultimate decision depends upon what evidence is considered decisive.

The Sixth Seal: The Day of Divine Wrath (6:12-17)

6:12-17 And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; And the stars of heaven fell unto

the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?

It would be difficult to paint any scene more moving or more terrible than that described at the opening of the sixth seal. All the elements of a great catastrophic judgment of God are here present, namely, a great earthquake, the sun becoming black, the moon becoming as blood, the stars of heaven falling like ripe figs, the heaven departing as a scroll, and every mountain and island moving. This is an awe-inspiring scene, but what does it mean prophetically?

Students of Revelation have had difficulty interpreting this passage, and the tendency has been to regard these judgments as symbolic rather than real. The motive behind this interpretation has been a reluctance to accept a literal interpretation of these judgments falling on the earth at this time; hence, the disturbances of the heavens have been taken to refer to changes in human government, and disturbances in the earth as referring to the upsetting of tradition and commonly fixed ideas.

H. A. Ironside, for instance, comments:

It is therefore not a world-wide, literal earthquake that the sixth seal introduces, but rather the destruction of the present order--political, social, and ecclesiastical--reduced to chaos; the breaking down of all authority, and the breaking up of all established and apparently permanent institutions.¹⁶¹

On the other side, Peake urges interpretation of Revelation in its plain sense unless good reasons indicate otherwise:

The Apocalypse is no doubt often obscure and its language is often allegorical. But it has to be interpreted in its plain sense far more frequently than many expositors are willing to admit. Much is written in simple characters which expositors have insisted on treating as hieroglyphics. In particular natural phenomena have been interpreted of historical events and the author has been credited with describing a political movement when he has been really speaking of God's judgments through nature. And the temptation has been especially great to find allegories where the author describes things in a matter-of-fact way, when the descriptions are bizarre and uncongenial to modern taste.¹⁶²

There are a number of reasons for preferring to take this passage in its literal meaning. While this is not the final breakup of the world as described later in Revelation, when a further period of terrible judgments will be poured on the world, it does seem to indicate that beginning with the sixth seal God is undertaking a direct intervention into human affairs. The judgments of war, famine, and death, and the martyrdom of the saints have largely originated in human decision and in the evil heart of man. The judgment described here, however, originates in God as a divine punishment inflicted upon a blasphemous world.

In view of the catastrophic and climactic character of the period, there is no good reason why there should not be precisely the elements mentioned here, namely, disturbances in the heavens and earthquakes on the earth. This is borne out by the effect upon the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the chief captains, the mighty men, bondmen, and freemen mentioned in verse 15, who hide themselves in dens

and in the rocks of the mountains. The events are of such character that all are impressed with the fact that the day of the wrath of the Lord has come and their judgment is now about to take place. In support of this, E. W. Bullinger writes, "It is impossible for us to take this as symbolical; or as other than what it literally says. The difficulties of the symbolical interpretation are insuperable, while no difficulties whatever attend the literal interpretation." 163

It is questionable whether changes in government and in human affairs would have brought such a striking transformation in the hearts of these wicked people. As is often the case with desperate men, instead of availing themselves of the grace of God, they attempt to hide from the wrath of the Lamb by seeking escape in death. However their hope is futile, for death is not an escape but merely a change from one state to another. Those who escape through death from the immediate judgment of God are destined for eternal judgment at the judgment of the great white throne. The earth today so indifferent to the claims of God, so bent upon pleasure, luxury, and fame, will face in that day its terrible need.

All levels of society are here. Some are great men, some are slaves. In relation to judgment of the Lord Jesus Christ, however, everyone is exactly in the same predicament. Success in the world does not help; no one escapes.

The elements of divine judgment pictured here are common in the prophecies pertaining to the end of the age. Christ Himself predicted earthquakes (Matt. 24:7). Both earthquakes and the sun becoming black are intimated by Joel (Joel 2:2, 10, 30-31). The heavens departing as a scroll are mentioned in Isaiah 34:4 (cf. also Isa. 13:6-13). The resulting impression upon the unbelieving world is that the time of the judgment of God has come. They themselves say to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" It is apparent that creatures of earth have had some foreboding that their blasphemous unbelief and worship of the beast pictured in Revelation 13 are in defiance of the true God. They therefore seek refuge from the One sitting on the throne and apparently realize that the day of divine wrath has come.

In describing the period of judgment as a day of wrath, reference is not to a twenty-four-hour day but to a time period longer or shorter. The day of wrath in one sense is the whole period of the great tribulation, when God will deal in direct judgment with the world, climaxing with the return of Christ in power and glory and divine judgment upon all who oppose His coming. E. W. Bullinger describes the first six seals as

a summary of the judgments distributed over the whole book; a brief summary of what will occur in "the day of the Lord," up to the time of His actual Apocalypse or Unveiling in chap. xix. 164

The day of wrath is at the beginning of the day of the Lord, that extended period when God is going to deal directly in governing the entire world. It is significant that early in the book of Revelation the day of wrath is declared as having already come. It is another evidence that the great tribulation is already under way.

The day of wrath is in contrast to the day of grace. Though God in every dispensation deals with believers and saves them by grace, the present age is supremely designed to manifest grace not only as the way of salvation but as the way of life. Today God is not attempting to bring divine judgment to bear upon sin. Though there may be some forms of immediate retribution, for the most part God is not settling accounts now. Neither the righteous are rewarded nor the wicked judged in a final sense today. This day of grace will be followed by the day of the Lord which features early in its progress the day of wrath.

By contrast to the judgments which are inflicted upon a Christ-rejecting world, believers in this present age are promised escape from the judgment which the world richly deserves (cf. John 3:18, 36). The person who trusts in Christ is not only uncondemned in this world but he has eternal life and is a member of God's family. By contrast the unbeliever shall never see life, but abides under the wrath of God which in due time will be inflicted.

The book of Revelation discredits those who hold that God is so loving and kind that He will never judge people who have not received His Son. Though the modern mind is reluctant to accept the fact that God will judge the wicked, the Bible clearly teaches that He will. The Scriptures reveal a God of love as clearly as they reveal a God of wrath who will deal with those who spurn the grace proffered in the Lord Jesus Christ. The passage before us is a solemn word that there is inevitable judgment ahead for those who will not receive Christ by faith.

The close of chapter 6 of the book of Revelation advances the narrative to a new high in the progress of the book. In some sense chapter 6 is the outline of the important facts of the period of great tribulation, and the rest of the events of the book of Revelation are comprehended in the seventh seal introduced in chapter 8. Chapter 6 closes with a pointed question: "Who shall be able to stand?" The answer is obvious: Only those who avail themselves of the grace of God, even though they suffer a martyr's death in this future tragic period. This is brought out in the next chapter. The given revelation emphasizes the importance of partaking of the grace of God in this present age with the bright prospect of the Lord coming for His own.

141 August Van Ryn, Notes on the Book of Revelation, p. 87.

142 Cf. J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come, pp. 280-82.

143 John Peter Lange, Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Revelation, pp. 147 ff.; cf. note on symbolism by the American author, E. R. Craven, pp. 145-47; 178-79.

144 Roadhouse in his chart of the book of Revelation offers a novel interpretation of the book in which the first three and one-half years of the seven-year period preceding Christ's coming to earth are divided into four periods corresponding to the first four messages to the churches, the first four seals, the first four trumpets, all of which are viewed as simultaneous, that is, the first church, the first seal, and the first trumpet coincide. The saints are raptured after the first three and one-half years, and the last three and one-half years which follow fulfill that which is anticipated in the last three messages to the churches, the last three seals, and the last three trumpets. The vials operating independently are fulfilled toward the close of the second three and one-half years. Roadhouse also suggests that the four riders of Revelation 6 correspond to the four kings and empires of Daniel 7. The novelty of these suggestions is their own refutation (W. F. Roadhouse, Seeing the "Revelation," Appendix).

145 John Cumming, Lectures on the Apocalypse, pp. 44-45.

146 Ibid.

147 Ibid., pp. 453-74.

148 Ethelbert Stauffer, Christ and the Caesars, p. 170.

149 William Milligan, while sure that the rider of the first horse must represent Christ, in recognition of the difficulty of linking the four riders together, comes to the conclusion that each rider "is rather a cause, a manifestation of certain truths connected with the kingdom of Christ when that kingdom is seen to be, in its own nature, the judgment of the world" (The Book of Revelation, p. 89). His supporting arguments, however, are not convincing.

150 Edgar Ainslie, The Dawn of the Scarlet Age, p. 74.

151 F. A. Jennings, Studies in Revelation, p. 201.

152 Ibid.

153 Isbon T. Beckwith, The Apocalypse of John, pp. 517-19.

154 F. A. Tatford, Prophecy's Last Word, p. 86.

155 W. C. Stevens, Revelation, The Crown-Jewel of Biblical Prophecy, II, 129.

156 Arthur S. Peake, The Revelation of John, pp. 270-71, 273.

157 Apocalyptic Commentary, p. 73.

158 An Exposition of the Apocalypse, pp. 65-153.

159 J. H. McIlvaine, The Wisdom of the Apocalypse, pp. 133-35.

160 The Revelation, p. 55.

161 Lectures on the Revelation, p. 114.

162 Peake, pp. 178-79.

163 The Apocalypse, p. 274.

164 Ibid., p. 277.

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