

BOOK OF REVELATION

Lesson 15 - Chapter 6

The first half of Revelation chapter 6 that we studied last time is about what begins to happen on Earth as the Lamb in Heaven begins breaking the 7 seals on the secret scroll that was handed to Him by God the Father. After each of the first 4 seals is broken one and then another of the 4 living beings that surrounds God's throne orders a horse and his rider to go and create war and killing among humanity. Each horse and rider is in some way associated with one particular living being; what that connection is, is vague. The wording may only indicate a poetic way of showing the involvement of all 4 living beings as God's agents or it could be that in some sense each one of the 4 living beings was in charge of one or another of the 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse that was sent out along with the particulars of the catastrophe they were to cause.

The first horse was a white horse that carried a rider with a crown and a bow. We discussed that there is much disagreement within Christianity about the identity and purpose of this horseman. Some identify Him as the Christ; others as the anti-Christ. Some identify the rider as going forth to fight evil; others regard him as going forth to **cause** evil. The truth is that both sides of the debate have merit. That said, when we look at the overall purpose of the 4 horsemen it is certainly not to do good. Among the same Bible scholars who declare the next 3 horsemen to be satanic in nature there are also those who want to separate the first horseman (on the white horse) from the group such that He is good and the rest are evil. There is little in this passage to warrant this conclusion other, perhaps, than trying to skew the revealed information to validate a predetermined position on the matter. Clearly the 4 horsemen were sent as a group to act as a group with each assigned a different task; but their overall goal was to sow evil and discord among humanity.

The second horse was a red horse whose rider was given the authority to take whatever peace existed on Earth and destroy it. The third horse was a black horse whose rider carried a balance scale, which symbolized commerce. The idea was worldwide famine whereby food became more scarce and therefore more expensive. It seems that the staples of life, wheat and barley, were the items affected most heavily because the oil (meaning olive oil) and wine production appear to have survived the pestilence. Oil and wine were representative of the luxury items; therefore the idea is that while the average man and his family suffered greatly the wealthy and elite were able to weather the bad conditions rather easily. Why would God permit the rich to thrive and instead target the poor? Because this would be likely to cause tremendous class warfare to erupt with social justice becoming the watchword.

The fourth horse was a pale horse (more correctly translated as a green horse); its color was to denote its sickly condition. The rider was given 2 names: Death and Hades (or better, death and **She'ol**...that is, Death and the grave). Thus death and its aftermath would erupt all over the globe on a massive scale. Chapter 6 verse 8 says that through war, famine, plague and even through attacks by wild animals caused by these 4 horsemen, fully a quarter of all

inhabitants on our planet would die; however this is highly unlikely to occur in a proportional way. I think we can speculate to a small degree on how this might look.

One of the things that caught my eye was how attacks by wild animals would lead to many deaths. Is that merely symbolic or even just an ancient possibility that has since bypassed us? No. We're already seeing the effects of burgeoning human population centers impinging on the natural habitats of wild animals. We regularly hear of bears rummaging through trash cans in suburban areas, coyotes roaming neighborhoods of tract homes, elephants coming into towns and villages in India and Africa and killing villagers, and in places like Alaska the number of moose versus human clashes are on the increase. So just as for humans, when the food supply runs short through some calamity, wild animals are also affected and they'll go where they have to go and do what they have to do to survive. Humans and wild animals suddenly become competitors for the same limited food supply and the results are inevitable.

Naturally 3rd world countries and their vast populations of poor that perennially live on the edge of starvation would be the most vulnerable and the first to be severely affected. Those of us in the West would likely be the least hard hit because our wealth, technology, government entitlement programs, science and efficient food distribution systems would mitigate the damage. Nonetheless as we're already seeing in our time, any type of scarcity or disadvantage or even political disagreement within our society is perceived as gross unfairness and prejudice against one group or another of people and it takes very little these days to set off unruly protests and mob violence. But when sheer survival becomes the cause, anger, fear, and resentment boil over into panic, anarchy, and even civil war. Governments fall and new ones rise in such times; usually with a strongman at the helm that promises to be the deliverer of the masses from their plight if only he is given total power. WWII is our most recent example of this as hard times led to the rise of Hitler and Mussolini and the world is in many ways still dealing with the aftermath of that time.

These 4 judgments of God sent upon the world that we read about in Revelation 6:1 - 8 are but the first 4 of a total of 21 of them that we'll read about over the next few chapters. As we're shortly going to see, the character and nature of these judgments (if we're even correct to call them that) changes once the 5th seal is opened. Thus there is disagreement within Christianity as to whether the first 4 judgments are God's supernatural wrath or they're symbolic of something else or perhaps should not be seen as judgments at all. Clearly, to me, since the 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse are spirits and not actual physical beings; and since they are evil in nature and not godly; then what we have is not supernaturally caused calamity (like the cosmic, God directed fire that destroyed Sodom), but rather it is human upon human evil increasing because of increasing satanic influence and mankind pulling further and further away from Godly influence. It is my position that most of this satanic influence is also not of the supernatural kind, but rather more about mankind allowing, even reveling in, our evil inclinations ruling without restraint. Greed, covetousness, our search for personal pleasure and profit and the resulting foolishness may include us harming our environment and misusing our land and natural resources in ways that lead both to scarcity and to pestilence, and then finally to famine. It is not as though these same calamities have not occurred in ages past; rather it is that the severity will increase exponentially such that it brings the human population to the breaking point.

I won't give a long list of examples nor will I offer my own creative apocalyptic images; but one very real living example of what can happen is close to home for Americans, and that is the nation of Haiti. Haitians in their poverty, ignorance, and need to survive, have virtually destroyed their land and environment. They, and those seeking to take advantage of the illiterate and desperate population, have denuded the hillsides of vegetation, which has caused the run-off from rain to wash their precious top soil into the ocean. Now they have less arable land with poorer soil than ever and cannot grow enough food to sustain their population; there is no feasible way to recover the needed top soil. The nutrient rich soil now covers over the sand in the coastal waters and has destroyed some of the better fishing and clamming areas so the harvest of sea life is harder to get to and is less abundant than years earlier. Sewage systems are nearly non-existent and human waste causes disease. Water supplies are insufficient and polluted. Haitians can only survive by massive ongoing aid from the West; if it is ever stopped a huge portion of the population would starve to death. Now imagine this on a near global scale when each country is battling simply to grow enough food to feed their own people let alone having a surplus to sell to others. Thus the underlying nature of what is being depicted by the 4 horsemen is more about what I would loosely label as tribulation and less about God's wrath; although the line between the two in Revelation is fuzzy.

Let's look now at the opening of the 5th seal as the character and nature of what is revealed changes from the first 4 seals.

RE-READ REVELATION 6:9 - end

Just as we saw in chapter 5 regarding the creatures in Heaven and the description of God's throne room in Heaven, so, too, in chapter 6 regarding the martyred souls under God's heavenly altar must we take this information in a decidedly Jewish context or the sense of it either disappears or it can be allegorized into most anything one's imagination can make of it. In chapter 5 we saw, for instance, how the colored stones used to describe the One sitting on the throne exactly matched the tribal gemstone colors of the first born and last born of the 12 tribes of Israel, and also how the gemstone color of the 4th tribe that produced the Messiah matched the color of the rainbow that overarched God's throne. We also received the imagery of the 24 Elders holding harps and bowls before the Lord and noticed that it matched the earthly rituals performed by the 24 courses of Priests and Levites who used harps and bowls in the Temple of Jerusalem. With that understanding then we are finally able to apprehend the close connection that is being described between the Heavenly Throne room and Israel. So now in chapter 6 in regards to the vision of the breaking of the 5th seal, we also see Jewish imagery but it is of a different sort.

Verse 9 says that when the 5th seal was broken John was made aware of the souls of martyrs that died for their faith living under the altar of the Heavenly Temple. This entire scene sounds strange and almost out of place until we turn to the Jewish Sages. It seems that the thought of the righteous dead and of Israelite martyrs being buried under God's Heavenly altar or throne was already well established within Judaism and so that's why we find it used in the vision. The 2nd century Rabbi Natan HaBavli wrote this:

"HaKadosh, blessed be he, took the soul of Moses and stored it under the Throne of

Glory....Not only the soul of Moses is stored under the Throne of Glory, but the souls of the righteous are also stored there....."

In Avot diRabbi Natan 26 we read:

Rabbi Akiva used to say....."Whoever is buried beneath the altar is as though he were buried beneath the Throne of Glory".

Shabbat 152b speaks about the souls of the righteous dead being preserved under the Throne of Glory. In Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10 God tells Moses that He would elevate him to the highest Heaven and cause him to dwell under God's own Throne of Glory that is surrounded by Cherubim, Seraphim, and an untold number of angels. Thus John is being given a vision that incorporates standard Jewish understanding for his era. The point being that the notion of Believers' souls buried under the Throne of Glory was not a new Christian one given to John by God; it was an established Jewish one and naturally the reference from John's perspective would be to Jewish Messianic Believers who had died for their faith. Might this include some gentile Believers as well....Christians (so to speak)? Perhaps; but that doesn't precisely match with what we've learned so far and neither does it match with what we'll read when we get to one of the more famous chapters in Revelation: chapter 7.

The souls under the altar ask a question that is often asked by people in the Bible and I can say is also one that I have asked God on more than a few occasions and I'm sure you have, too: "How long?" How long, these martyred souls ask, before their blood is avenged by God judging the evil people on earth who murdered them?

CJB Psalm 82:2 "How long will you go on judging unfairly, favoring the wicked? (Selah)

CJB Psalm 94:3 How long are the wicked, ADONAI, how long are the wicked to triumph?

CJB Jeremiah 12:4 How long must the land mourn and the grass in all the fields wither? The wild animals and birds are consumed because of the wickedness of those who live there; for they say, "He will not see how we end up."

So the question coming from the martyred souls under the altar is but a continuation of the same question that Prophets and Kings had been asking for centuries: how long before God finally stops not only the wickedness but also before He judges the wicked and condemns them?

When the martyrs ask God to avenge their blood this usually sets off alarm bells in Christians because avenging, revenge, and vengeance are supposed to represent a decidedly anti-Christian mindset and behavior. Usually to help soothe troubled Christians we'll hear words from the pulpit to the affect that only God can righteously avenge; humans cannot. It follows, then, that it must be wrong to punish criminals....and especially wrong to execute murderers....because that is a form of revenge that only God can inflict. Let me set the record straight on this point. There is a vast gulf between justice as defined by God and our feeling offended and wanting pay back when we're insulted or cheated. What the martyrs are asking

for is that God play the biblical role of the **Go'el Ha'dam**: the blood avenger. Central to the understanding of this God-principle of the blood avenger is Genesis chapter 9.

CJB Genesis 9:5-6 ⁵ *I will certainly demand an accounting for the blood of your lives: I will demand it from every animal and from every human being. I will demand from every human being an accounting for the life of his fellow human being.*

⁶ *Whoever sheds human blood, by a human being will his own blood be shed; for God made human beings in his image.*

The big question, of course, is exactly who is authorized to take the life of the killer? In the days of Genesis there was no police force and justice was usually handled within the family. Later as human society evolved into having cities and organized government other systems to mete out such justice were invented and one of those systems involved the legitimate role of the **Go'el Ha'dam**. But another question to be asked is: is all killing to be avenged? The answer is that only killing that is not justifiable can be avenged. For instance killing in self defense is justifiable. Killing the enemy in war is justifiable. Killing a thief who comes into your house in the middle of the night is justifiable. Killing someone for angering you is not justifiable. Killing someone for stealing from you is not justifiable. Exodus 21 lays out some of the conditions for distinguishing justifiable versus unjustifiable killing and the different levels of unjustifiable killing (manslaughter versus premeditated homicide) that call for different penalties.

CJB Exodus 21:12-19 ¹² *"Whoever attacks a person and causes his death must be put to death.*

¹³ *If it was not premeditated but an act of God, then I will designate for you a place to which he can flee.* ¹⁴ *But if someone willfully kills another after deliberate planning, you are to take him even from my altar and put him to death.* ¹⁵ *"Whoever attacks his father or mother must be put to death.*

¹⁶ *"Whoever kidnaps someone must be put to death, regardless of whether he has already sold him or the person is found still in his possession.* ¹⁷ *"Whoever curses his father or mother must be put to death.* ¹⁸ *"If two people fight, and one hits the other with a stone or with his fist, and the injured party doesn't die but is confined to his bed; ¹⁹ then, if he recovers enough to be able to walk around outside, even if with a cane, the attacker will be free of liability, except to compensate him for his loss of time and take responsibility for his care until his recovery is complete.*

So the modern thought among a large number of Christians that the death penalty for murder is barbaric and ended with Christ is simply false. God generally expects a life for a life....IF....the killing was not justifiable.

The killing of Believing martyrs is, by definition, not justifiable. A Jew or gentile who professes his faith in Christ and is killed for that reason alone is an unjustifiable killing. Those martyrs who are under God's Throne of Glory (or altar) are only asking for what is right and legal in

God's eyes; and they hear that they will have their justice soon enough.

As I've addressed the issue of Islam in earlier lessons.....a belief system that I characterize as the anti-Christ Believers religion....I will also address it on the matter of martyrs and vengeance since Islam has re-emerged in our time as a force. For Islam a martyr is a Muslim who dies in the process of killing someone of another religion or even when killing someone from another and opposing sect of Islam. Islamic homicide bombers who walk into hotels and pizza shops and embassies and blow themselves up while taking the lives of many others are seen in Islam as martyrs to be admired. Martyrs are offered a special place in Islamic heaven for their murderous actions, and glorified on earth by their fellow Muslims. The Bible would not accept this behavior from a God worshipper and in fact regards this person as a murderer worthy only of the most severe punishment.

In Islam killing in revenge is regularly associated with the loss of face. Certainly Islam has a criminal justice system that punishes perpetrators, up to and including the death penalty. But homicide in Islam as often as not is a means of turning one's shame into honor; shame and honor form a social status system that has nothing to do with criminal activity. Shame and honor as a social system is not exclusive to Islam and in fact we see this in action among Israelites in the Bible. Christ spoke against revenge in the name of restoring one's honor after being shamed in His famous "turn the other cheek" instruction of Matthew 5:38, 39.

So the martyrs under God's throne are merely asking for God's laws on murder to be enforced in Heaven. This does not necessarily mean that justice was not done on earth; no doubt for some Believers it was not, and likely for a few it was. But when it comes to sin there is always a double jeopardy involved. There is whatever civil punishment a person might receive from a human government on earth; and then there is what that person may receive when they die and are judged by God. We can speak of paying one's debt to society; but that is separate from the debt owed to God for our sin. Prison time does not repay what we owe to God. That debt is not repaid and remains due until and unless we confess, repent, and turn our lives over to Messiah.

The martyred souls were handed a white robe and told to continue waiting a little while longer for justice. The white robe indicates absolute purity. However since these are martyrs it may also be taken as a reward for persevering in their faith even unto death. The white robes, then, give us closure that for sure these martyred souls are Believers because only Believers in Christ are so purified as to merit a white robe. The idea of waiting longer is a figure of speech because the issue of time in Heaven doesn't exist. So the thought is that some other things need to play out on Earth before God begins to assert His vengeance on behalf of the martyrs.

What might rightfully frighten us a bit, however, is this: the remainder of verse 11 says that the waiting has much to do with being patient until the full number of martyrs has been reached. Since we know of never ending Christian martyrdom especially in the Middle East and in parts of Africa, and we are aware of the biblical prophecies of the world turning against Believers with a vengeance as the time of the end gets even closer, then folks.....we will soon be in the crosshairs. We may think of faithfulness until death as more meaning not getting discouraged if we get sick and die. But I think the admonition has far more to do with persecution and

martyrdom than with the sorts of afflictions that affect all humans at some point or another. I imagine John thought that the wait was going to be very short.

This brings up yet another issue. If we are to take it that the souls of the martyrs are aware of the 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse and of their effect on planet Earth, and if there is truly a chronological sequence that we're seeing taking place whereby FIRST the 4 horsemen are sent out, and then only afterwards do the martyrs under the altar beseech God for justice (since they represent the 5th seal to be broken), then asking when God might take justice on the murderers hints that the first 4 actions associated with the first 4 seals being opened are **not** seen by them as part of God's judgment upon humanity (a judgment for which they have been asked to wait). If that is a correct assumption, then it lends credence to the idea that perhaps the 4 horsemen represent increased tribulation (defined as man's inhumanity against their fellow man), but not God judging and pouring out His supernatural wrath. And now with the 5th seal, there is really nothing that occurs but that martyred souls are given white robes and told to wait. In other words, the first 5 seals don't seem to be God's wrath being poured out in judgment..

J. Massyngberde Ford in her comments on the 5th seal point out that as in some ways trivial as it might seem, in fact the issue of the martyred souls may be the key to the entire chapter. This is because on the one hand it looks backward at the martyred Lamb of chapter 5 with whom the martyred souls identify, but on the other hand it looks forward to the number of those sealed and protected by God and of the configuration of the angels of chapter 7. For one thing the seals of chapter 7 then must be seen in the context of the just judgment of God. And this comes only after the political, economic and social upheavals caused by the 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse implying that many of the martyrs will come out of that upheaval. However we are bordering on the edge of speculation and so I think we'll go no further with that.

In verse 12 the Lamb breaks the 6th seal; immediately there was a great earthquake. This, of course, smacks of something directly caused by God as a judgment. At the same time the sun turned black and the moon became blood red (it is this passage that instigated the idea of the dreaded blood moons....much ado about nothing in my opinion!) Next stars fell from Heaven to earth like a fig tree drops its leaves and the sky rolled back like a scroll. There's been much conjecture about exactly what this might be describing but one thing is certain: while the 4 horsemen brought upheaval to human society, this opening of the 6th seal brings upheaval to nature.

Are these descriptions literal or are they symbolic? We must acknowledge that the literature genre of apocalypse contains much symbolism. On the other hand not all is symbolic and so it is usually best in the Bible to take everything as literal that can be taken as literal in its plain sense. I see no reason to take these images of nature being violently shaken as symbolic. For one reason Christ predicted earthquakes coupled with societal upheaval.

^{CJB} Matthew 24:7-8 ⁷ For peoples will fight each other, nations will fight each other, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various parts of the world; ⁸ all this is but the beginning of the 'birth-pains.'

Isaiah prophesied about the sun growing dark. In fact this verse is a direct allusion to this Isaiah passage.

^{CJB} Isaiah 50:2-3 ² Why was no one here when I came? Why, when I called, did nobody answer? Is my arm too short to redeem? Have I too little power to save? With my rebuke I dry up the sea; I turn rivers into desert, their fish rot for lack of water and they die of thirst; ³ I dress the heavens in black to mourn and make their covering sackcloth."

The Prophet Joel spoke about frightening sudden changes in the moon along with other happenings that Revelation tells us will come about upon the End of Days.

^{CJB} Joel 3:1 "After this, I will pour out my Spirit on all humanity. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions; ² and also on male and female slaves in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

³ I will show wonders in the sky and on earth- blood, fire and columns of smoke. ⁴ The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the coming of the great and terrible Day of ADONAI."

⁵ At that time, whoever calls on the name of ADONAI will be saved. For in Mount Tziyon and Yerushalayim there will be those who escape, as ADONAI has promised; among the survivors will be those whom ADONAI has called.

Modern day humans would look to the skies and, seeing these things happening, think in terms of movies and even science documentaries that say that some day, regardless of what humanity does, our sun will burn out, stars will explode, and meteors will strike a helpless Earth once again bringing on an extinction level event. Jews of John's day thought of gigantic cosmic disturbances as directly related to the sin of mankind. And as John witnessed this vision, it was the thought of massive amounts of sin and its consequences that would have instantly come upon him. Turns out John would have been right and our science community wrong for indeed the catastrophe that is being depicted here has everything to do with God's judgment and wrath for the sins of humanity that have piled up century after century.

We are meant to notice that 7 separate phenomena are recorded. 1) an earthquake; 2) the sun going dark; 3) the moon turning blood red; 4) stars falling; 5) the heavens (meaning the sky) rolling up; 6) mountains and islands moving out of the places; and 7) global panic with no exceptions (verse 15). Then, within the 7th phenomenon 7 classes of people are said to be affected: 1) kings; 2) rulers; 3) generals; 4) the wealthy; 5) the powerful elite; 6) common slaves; and 7) common free people.

Thus the idea is that we have not only completeness but finality expressed in this burst of 7's. That the wrath of the Lamb and of the Lord God Almighty cannot be endured by anyone, or escaped by anyone, is because it so all encompassing and horrible. John alludes to Hosea's graphic description of panic from Hosea 10:8:

Hosea 10:8 ^{CJB} ⁸ Destruction will come to the high places of Aven, that is, to the sin of

Isra'el. Thorns and thistles will grow over their altars; and they will say to the mountains, "Cover us!" and to the hills, "Fall on us!"

There is no place to run; no place to hide. Better, say millions of traumatized people all over our planet, to simply be crushed by boulders and get it over with than to keep experiencing the Great Day of the Lord's fury. This is such a sad commentary to end this chapter because we are told that instead of the vast world population of Unbelievers (many of them our neighbors, friends, and family) coming to their senses in the midst of what has become painfully obvious and calling out to the God of Israel in repentance and begging for mercy, they'd rather be quickly killed on their own terms to end their misery and fear.

Next week we'll begin chapter 7.