

The Seven Seals
 Revelation 6
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 Dr. Jerry Nelson

An outline of Revelation:

- 1 Introduction/Purpose**
- 2-3 Letters to 7 churches**
- 4-5 A scene in heaven**
- 6-18 Just before the end**
- 19 Jesus comes again**
- 20-22 The new heavens and earth**

Last week all of us were appalled when we read of a father throwing his two month old son against the wall repeatedly because it wouldn't stop crying.

We were likewise moved when we saw and read about the 14 year old boy that brought 5 weapons to school in Kentucky and shot 8 other students in prayer, killing three of them.

When Jesus came to earth the first time he indicated that he came to preach about and bring in the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God, The Kingdom of heaven or The Kingdom of Christ are all referring to the same kingdom.

It is God's rightful rule over the world -
 it is justice and peace and love prevailing in this world.
 it is the end of hatred, envy, and anger.
 It is caring, and giving, and enjoying each other.
 It is the Kingdom of God!
 It's a world very different from this one.

And when Jesus came he said, "Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is near".

He said, "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

In other words the kingdom of God will spread through or permeate the whole world.

Jesus' first followers certainly had visions of grandeur in mind when they assumed that Jesus had come as the Messiah to overthrow the Roman rulers and establish God's kingdom on earth right then.

Jesus talked about his death but his disciples didn't want to hear that, they wanted to hear about winning.

It was not uncommon for them to ask Jesus, "O.K. when will the end of the age come?" "When will the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of heaven be reality and not just promise?"

By the time John wrote this book of Revelation to the seven churches in Turkey, Jesus had been physically gone for nearly 50 years.

Certainly there were some among them who wondered when the end that Jesus promised would come to pass.

When would the Kingdom of God be a full reality and not just an anticipation?
When would goodness and righteousness rule instead of these ungodly, unjust and immoral Caesars?

Because time would pass, the Apostle Peter predicted what some would say:

"In the last days scoffers will come... They will say, Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation."

Now nearly 2000 years later the scoffers are still scoffing and we too are still wondering: "When is the end going to come?"

It doesn't look to us as if the Kingdom of God is coming.

It doesn't appear to us as if the Kingdom of heaven is winning.

On the contrary when we hear about 2 month old babies being killed and teenagers being shot as they pray - it seems that evil is still as strong and prevalent as ever.

Anne Dillard in her book ,Holy the Firm, put the question and even the frustration quite succinctly: "What in the Sam Hill is going on here anyway?"

God, through the Apostle John, wrote the book of Revelation to answer that question.

We know about Jesus' first coming (that's what Christmas is all about) and the latter chapters of Revelation tell us about his second coming but how do the already 2000 years of history in between fit?

Chapter 6 of Revelation addresses that issue.
READ Chapter 6

Most people have heard of the book of Revelation.
Some have even tried reading it.

One thing common to many of us who read it is the question:
When do these things happen?

I wish for you to look at a time-line and on it we will place the events of Revelation - noting in particular where chapter 6 fits:

OT - Cross - Now - Trib - S.C - M - E

Chapter: Time in history:

1 -	Anytime after the Cross/resurrection
2/3 -	early "Now" 1st Century
4/5 -	anytime in "Now"
6:1-11 -	anytime in "Now"
6:12f -	Tribulation
7 -	just prior to Tribulation
8-18 -	Tribulation
19 -	at S.C. (Second Coming)
20 -	M (Millenium - 1000 years)
21 -	E (Eternity - New earth)

I want you to think with me about yet one more issue before we look at chapter 6 more closely.

As we have already seen, chapter 6 refers to "seven seals".
The seals are on the scroll/book.

These seals were evidently like those wax spots that we might put on a fancy envelope to seal it. Seals in those days, like our day, often were imprinted with a signet ring to indicate who sealed the letter or in this case the scroll.

When we read chapter 6 we quickly note that when some of the seals are opened there follows a description of violence and suffering on the earth.

Conquest, bloodshed, economic difficulty, and death.

Those of you familiar at all with this book know that there are seven seals in all AND that later in the book are seven trumpets of judgment (8:2) and still later are seven bowls of judgment (15:1).

The structure of the rest of the book is built around these 21 seals, trumpets and bowls.

What is this about seals, trumpets and bowls?

A simple way to understand this is to think of seals as being opened to reveal something, trumpets announcing something and bowls as containing something that is poured out on the earth.

Now back to the issue of the structure - how the 21 seals, trumpets and bowls relate to each other:

There is an insert in your bulletin that notes this structure.

The first line across the top of the page (other than the heading) indicates the seals come first, then the trumpets, and lastly the bowls.

But notice in that top line that between the sixth and seventh, in each case, there is an interlude -

And in the interlude, other information is given.

Looking at the middle of that page then you will see the outline of the judgments:

Seals 1-6 in chapter 6

Trumpets 1-6 in chapter chapters 8 and 9

and bowls 1-7 in chapters 15 and 16

Looking then at the next line of the page you will see the 7 seals, 7 trumpets and 7 bowls in a row.

But if you look carefully at it you will note that I have attempted to depict something about the relationship of the 7th in each set, to what follows.

When we look at the seals today and the trumpets later, we will notice that the 7th in each case is not actually any event at all but is an introduction to the next set of judgments.

So that there are not 7 “seal” events but there are 6 with the 7th actually being all 7 “trumpet” events.

And the 7th “trumpet” event is actually all 7 “bowl” events.

With that background and overview I want us now to come back to chapter 6 specifically.

As I have already said, chapter 6 demonstrates the connection between the past and the future.

I want us to start with the 6th seal in the last part of the chapter because of the uniqueness of it in comparison to the first five seals.

6:12-17 "I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the lamb. For the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?"

First of all I want you to notice that we have finished the chapter and there is no 7th seal.

We don't find it until chapter 8 and then we will see that the 7th seal is actually, as I indicated earlier, a reference to the next set of events - the 7 trumpets.

But looking at this 6th seal we find that it is decidedly different than the first five.

The language describes a cataclysmic time that is far more severe than any of the first five seals, as we will see in a minute.

Along with many others, I think that when John gets to the 6th seal, in contrast to the first five seals, he sees into the future - he sees the great tribulation that is yet to come.

This 6th seal is a forecast, a preview of what is yet to come.

It is a time when even the physical world will be thrown into convulsions - nothing will be stable - the earth will shake, the mountains will erupt, islands will submerge, the skies will be dramatically different and people's hearts will fail as they realize that it is true - God has come in final judgment.

This 6th seal then is a brief description of the great tribulation.

But while the 6th seal is a look into that future tribulation, the first five seals are a description of this present age.

Let me repeat, the first 5 seals don't describe the great tribulation - they describe the time before the great tribulation.

When the Christians of John's day first read this letter they would have had right to think these first five seals were describing their day.

When Christians of John Calvin's day read this letter they would have been right in thinking it was describing their day.

When we read it today we even have more reason to think it is describing our day.

But we don't know the day or the hour.

These are the signs that the end is coming.

And what are these signs?

What does Jesus here show John that helps make sense of the seeming dominance and invincibility of evil?

6:1,2 "I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come!. I looked and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

This is the first of four horses and riders that appear.

The "four horsemen of the apocalypse", they are sometimes called.

In chapter 5, we have already seen that the "Lamb" who opens the seals is the resurrected, ascended and reigning Jesus Christ, who alone is worthy to initiate the ending of the world.

In chapter 4 we saw that the four living creatures represent all creation.

There's probably no significance as to why one of those creatures does the calling out and so most important is what John sees.

Even though there are similarities between this horse and rider and Jesus on a white horse in chapter 19, there are more reasons to understand that this rider is not Jesus but instead is a representation of evil and destruction on the earth.

The weapons are different, the crowns are different and most importantly, the context is different.

This horse and rider, with the others, goes out to destroy.

Many, as do I, see this horse as symbolic of warfare.

He has a bow for war and he goes out to conquer.

While war has always been present through all of human history, consider our more current history:

Billy Graham in a recent book writes, "The post-cold war stockpiles of nuclear weapons still give mankind the power to destroy the earth seventeen times over in flames reaching 130 million degrees...The number of third world nations with dreams of glory constantly seems to be growing. There are several military dictators who would think nothing of lobbing a nuclear missile into Tel Aviv or Jerusalem if they had the capacity..." "Historians tells us that the world has seen more than four thousand wars during the last five thousand years most of them lasting for years at a time....We know that over 60 million people died in the two world wars of the first half of this century." (Graham The Coming Storm p180-81)

In August 1991 "the Journal of the American Medical Association published a compelling study of ... death in war which reported among other things the estimated average annual deaths from war over the past four centuries. The researchers found that the average annual death rate from war in the seventeenth century was 9,500. The yearly average was 15,000 in the eighteenth century, 13,000 in the nineteenth century and an enormous 458,000 per year in the twentieth century...so far.

Even if we can't tell if the number of wars is increasing we can be certain that the destructive power of them is rapidly increasing.

Jesus says this is a sign that the end is certain!

Then we come to the second horse and rider:

6:3,4 "When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come! Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword."

If the white horse and rider depicted invasion from an outside power then the red horse and rider depict warfare within - internecine warfare - brother against brother.

The mission of this rider is to remove peace from the earth.

People turning on each other.

Zech 14:13 "And on that day a great panic from the Lord shall fall on them, so that each will lay hold on the hand of his fellow, and the hand of the one will be raised against the hand of the other. "

In this time rebellion and civil disorder reign.

Again it is noteworthy to see how much civil war is raging across our world.

Consider Vietnam, Cambodia, Uganda, Rwanda, Zaire, Algeria, Ireland, and the list goes on.

Yes, there has always been brother rising against brother but Jesus says here in Revelation that such is a sign the end is certain.

Look at the third horse and rider:

6:5,6 "When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked and there before me was a black horse. Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine."

This horse is black and with its rider it represents economic hardship.

The rider held a scale for weighing and then selling food.

But notice the food was so expensive people could barely live.

A man would work the entire day and earn no more than his own bread whether a rich man's food (wheat) or a poor man's food (barley).

It's called living at a subsistence level or worse.

Things would be 10-12 times more expensive than they should be.

Years ago singer/songwriter Larry Norman put it this way: "A piece of bread could buy a bag of gold."

When militaries march and civil war breaks out famine often results.

Someone wrote, "Here they come: the stick children with their flat unseeing stares. Their knee sockets are so large, and their calves are so thin that you wonder how they can manage to walk. They are too weak to sweep away the flies that have settled on their mouths and nostrils. They can only hold their bowls out toward the television cameras." This scene is not from the 70s but from East Africa today.

A World Press report a couple of years ago was titled "The Four Horsemen are here to stay".

Imagine going from an income of \$35,000 to \$3500 instantly.

For years agronomists and agriculturists have been saying that we have the technology and land to eliminate hunger - why hasn't it happened?

Because the four horsemen of the apocalypse are loose on the earth - that's why.

See the next horse:

6:7,8 "When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the fourth living creature say, "Come! I looked and there before me was a pale horse. Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague and by the wild beasts of the earth."

The result of the actions of the first three horses is naturally the fourth.

Death comes from the war, the strife, the famine that increasingly plagues the earth.

It is worth noting that death is given power over $\frac{1}{4}$ of the earth to kill.

When we come to the trumpets we will notice that death is given power over $\frac{1}{3}$ of the world, obviously a greater percentage.

And when we come to the third set of judgments we will see that death is given no limitation at all.

What the $\frac{1}{4}$ means is that many will die but not as many as in the great judgments yet to come.

One author writes "Here is death's record of achievement: 50 million deaths every year. (in 10 years that's $\frac{1}{2}$ billion) Every year a million people die from man-made disasters; 80,000 die from earthquakes, and 10,000 from floods.

Each day a shocking 25,000 die from pollution alone.

In the U.S. 50,000 people die annually in traffic accidents;

11,000 die from falls;

Worldwide there are 5 million malaria deaths per year and 3 million from tuberculosis;

2.8 million children die annually from vaccine-preventable diseases, while infectious diseases kill 4 million un-immunized children.

There are 5 million diarrhea deaths by children under age 5;

4 million die of pneumonia.

We are told there are potentially 60 million HIV/AIDS carriers with 3 million per year dying.

Add to these the estimated 16.8 million who die from parasitic diseases, 13.3 million from circulatory disease,

4.3 millions cancer deaths,

2.6 million tobacco-related deaths and

401,000 suicides." (Graham p226-7)

Yes, death is loose on the earth.

And then the Lamb opened the 5th seal:

6:9-11 "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood? Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed."

Who are these "souls"?

These are God's people who have been killed for their faith in Christ.

In the opening of her recent book on the persecution of Christians Nina Shea writes, "Millions of American Christians pray in their churches each week, oblivious to the fact that Christians in many parts of the world suffer brutal torture, arrest, imprisonment, and even death - their homes and communities laid waste - for no other reason than that they are Christians. The shocking, untold story of our time is that more Christians have died this century simply for being Christians than the first nineteen centuries after the birth of Christ." p 1 of ITLD

Why under the altar?

Under the altar was where the basin was placed which collected the blood of the sacrifices.

This then is a vivid way of describing that they were martyred for their faith.

They were as Paul described himself: "I am already on the point of being sacrificed (dying)." II Tim 4:6

Every believer is to take up his cross and follow Jesus - to be willing to suffer martyrdom for the sake of Christ.

To become a Christian is to make that commitment.

Whether we are actually killed is another matter - but we are ready to be killed - we have made that commitment in following Christ.

These souls under the altar are Christ-followers who had died because of their commitment to Christ - They are martyrs.

This great company of believers call out to the Lord, "How Long until the end?"
And the Lord says there are yet more who will die for their faith - the end won't come until that happens.

It may not be happening in our country yet but martyrdom is increasing around the world.

How long before God says, "enough!"

In a few short verses John has described this present age and then, as we saw earlier in the 6th seal, very briefly he described the great tribulation yet to come.

Look to Mark 13 to see another description of the period of the seals:

Question:

Mk 13:4 "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to be fulfilled?"

What Jesus describes next is the same as he describes in Revelation as the time of the first five "seals". Listen to the similarity of language:

Mk 13:7ff "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations... Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved..."

Then in this passage Jesus describes what in Revelation is described in the 6th seal: A time of intense Tribulation - the great tribulation:

Mk 13:19ff

(Then) will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now - and never to be equaled again. If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect (God's people), he has shortened them...

Then, just as in the 6th seal and in the trumpets and bowls there is a great cataclysmic upheaval of the physical universe, just before Christ comes again.

Mk 13:24ff

But in those days following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. AT THAT TIME men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory."

When will this happen?

Mk 13:32ff "No one knows about that day or hour... Be on guard. Be alert. You do not know when that time will come....What I say to you I say to everyone: Watch!"

But if these signs have been evident for nearly 2000 years, how do they help us detect that the end is approaching?

Note the difference between what we naturally look for (dates and times) and what Jesus emphasizes (preparation and certainty).

When Jesus describes to John in this symbolic language what this present age will be like he is not talking about the nearness of the end chronologically - that is not the emphasis.

He is describing the certainty of the end. That is his emphasis!

We want to know timing and Jesus wants to know we are prepared.

We want dates and Jesus wants steadfastness.

I wish I had the time to demonstrate this to you but please look at it yourself: Almost every time the Bible discusses the end of the age it is not for the purpose of predicting the time but for the purpose of encouraging God's people to be prepared and to anticipate the future.

The description of the end times is not very positive in that war, famine, death will be even more prominent than now.

But for the believer all that turmoil only serves to confirm the future - Jesus is coming.

The evidence that could drive unbelievers to despair leads believers to say "even so come Lord Jesus" not out of a defeatist attitude but precisely the opposite - victory - Jesus is coming.

The same evidence elicits two opposite responses in unbelievers and believers.

I don't mean we are happy for the difficulties on the earth but we do see in them the harbinger of victory.

Jesus said it this way in Luke 21:28 "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

What does Chapter 6 communicate?

Yes, evil appears to reign and to be sure - evil does devastate people and God's world.
But is that the way it will always be?

In chapter 6 summarizes history to date - evil appears to win
BUT a new day is coming.

Will you believe him?