

Revelation Chapters 6 and 7

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Several years ago, a family in our church called on a Friday morning and said their mother was in the hospital and only had a short time remaining. They were hoping for someone from the church to come by and be with them. I got in the truck and got there as soon as I could. It was clear there would only be an hour or two left in this wonderful woman's life. A dozen or so family members filled the room, gathering by her bed, taking turns stroking her hand, kissing her on the forehead, reminding her how much they loved her. One of them nodded at me and I opened my Bible and read verses appropriate for the occasion: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants." "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." "I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in me will live, even though they die." "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." When I closed my Bible, something unexpected happened—the family began breaking out in song. *Amazing Grace. It Is Well with My Soul. How Great Is Our God. Take My Life and Let It Be.* I stood in that room, watching in wonder and appreciation how this family was able to hold suffering and singing together in such perfect unison. It was one of the greatest trials in their life, but they trusted wholeheartedly in God in the midst of it. That's what we see in our passage today. If you have your Bibles, turn with me to Revelation 6 and 7.

We are continuing in our series through the book of Revelation, and as a bit of review, we've been saying from the very beginning that the word "revelation" in Greek is "apocalypse." It's not predictions about the future, doom and gloom, the sky is falling; it simply means to pull back the curtain, to unveil, to get a look behind the scenes to see what's really going on. So far we've seen that Revelation pulls back the curtain on

- Jesus' identity (chapter 1),
- The churches' identity (chapters 2-3), and
- The worship in heaven (chapters 4-5).

Today, as we continue our study, we are going to look behind the curtain at

- Hardships throughout history (chapter 6), and
- How God protects his people (chapter 7).

These chapters pull back the veil and allow us to look behind the curtain to understand the pattern of suffering that exists all throughout human history, and how God works sovereignly, even in extreme hardship, for the good of those who love him. Before we dive in, there's something we must grasp: Revelation 6-7 is not describing events that did take place or that will take place, but rather events that always take place. In other words, Revelation 6-7 is not focused only on the past, or only on the future; rather these chapters are a template, a grid, or a lens to understand what happens all throughout history, in every generation. These chapters were relevant to the people living at the end of the first century when Revelation was written, they were relevant to those in the 5th century, the 9th century, the 14th century, and of course, they are just as relevant to us today. With that in mind, let's dive in.

First, by show of hands, how many of you have heard of the four horsemen of the apocalypse? Those four horsemen are found in Revelation 6:1-8.

- For the white horse we are told its rider had a crown; he is a conqueror bent on conquest.
- For the red horse we are told its rider had a sword; he makes people kill each other.

- For the black horse we are told he held a scale, like the kind used in the marketplace to weigh things. Food became scarce and expensive; he brought famine / economic depression / crushing inflation.
- The pale horse was named death and he brought wide-spread loss of life.

Now remember, this is not describing events far off in the future, or events in the distant past. This is a description of what has happened throughout human history. The history books are basically records of powerful men who want more power. Dictators who want more dominion. More land. More resources. They use their power to wage war, which makes men kill each other, which leads to famine because when war is happening, resources are scarce. Men are off fighting instead of farming, so the land produces less. What is produced is consumed first by the military, so there are only subsistence rations left for the rest of the population. Depression and inflation are rampant. We think the inflation we've witnessed is bad because home and food prices have doubled. Our inflation is simply because of government overspending. Inflation and then economic depression caused by war is exponentially worse, and it always impacts the impoverished the most. This horrific chain of events culminates in wide-spread loss of life. Death through war. Death through famine. Death through plague. The aftermath is gruesome.

Think about what's happening right now with Russia and Ukraine. Russia has a dictator named Putin who is bent on conquest; he wants more land and more resources. He wages war against Ukraine. Ukraine defends themselves and fights back. The entire world experiences higher energy costs. In the last few years conservative estimates are that over 1,000,000 people have died in that conflict. But it's not just Russian and Ukraine. That's just one example. This has been happening for all of history! If you define war very strictly as an active, militarized conflict between at least two established nations that has claimed more than 1,000 lives, then the world has continuously experienced war for more than 92% of history. And those wars have claimed more than 1,000,000,000 lives.

It's more than only armed conflicts. The 20th century has witnessed horrific famines including:

- Chinese Famine 1907—25,000,000 deaths
- Russian Famine 1917-21—5,000,000 deaths
- Soviet Famine 1932-33—10,000,000 deaths
- Bengal Famine 1943—7,000,000 deaths.
- Great Chinese Famine 1959-61—40,000,000 deaths.
- North Korean Famine 1994-98—3,000,000 deaths
- Congo War Famine 1998-2004—3,800,000 deaths

When you add these, and the smaller famines, the total was over 110,000,000 deaths in the previous century alone.

Then think about the plagues that have occurred. The deadliest plagues in history have been:

- Justinianic Plague (541-549) — 15,000,000 deaths (35% of Europe)
- Black Death (1346-1353) — 25,000,000 deaths (40% of Europe)
- Spanish Flu (1918-1920) — 50,000,000 (it killed more Americans than all the wars we were involved in throughout the 20th century combined; 3% of the world population)
- HIV (1981-) — 42,000,000 deaths (over 40,000,000 living with it, with nearly a million dying every year)

When you add these, and the smaller famines, the total was over 500,000,000 deaths from plagues.

The question is not, “At what time in the future are the four horsemen going to ride?” They are always riding! All throughout history, no matter where or when you live, in some way, shape or form, you are going to be impacted by hardship and suffering.

When the fifth seal opens, we learn that all the suffering and hardship is going to impact Christians just as much, if not more than, everyone else. “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” (Revelation 6:9). Not only are Christians subject to the general suffering of the world, but also many have lost their lives because of their faith. These are people who have been slain because of the word of God and their testimony. The most conservative estimates are that throughout history there have been between 14,000,000 to 70,000,000 Christian martyrs. The souls of these men and women are in heaven, and we are told, “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?’” (Revelation 6:10).

I regret to let you know that, on occasion, my kids are mean to one another. Hudson will push Addie down. Addie will take Luke’s stuffed animal. Luke will throw a toy at Addie’s face. When these things happen, the offended party comes to me looking for justice. They’ve been hurt and they want me to vindicate them. I always say to the person who did wrong: “How are we going to make this right?” It usually involves some kind of discipline to the offender, and then an apology and return of property to the offended. When we are wronged, we want justice. We want vindication. So do the martyrs. They ask, “How long until you make it right?”

Instead of getting what they ask for right away, listen to what happens: “Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been” (Revelation 6:11). They get a white robe, they are sharing in part of the prize of heaven, they are sharing in victory of Christ, but they are told they must wait—justice isn’t going to come about right away. As a matter of fact, more of their brothers and sisters are going to be killed just as they have been. God says, “I have a plan for human history, and it doesn’t make sense to you. It doesn’t involve the immediate punishment of the wicked and the immediate vindication of the saints. It involves the long, slow, arduous, sometimes painful and bloody unfolding of history.” Somehow, somehow, through all this, God is going to work to bring about his purposes for the world.

Do you remember when Jesus told the parable in Matthew 13 about a farmer who planted wheat in his field? After he did it, his enemy came and planted weeds in the wheat. A few weeks later, once everything started to grow, his workers came and said, “It appears you don’t know what you are doing. You’re not a good farmer. Look at all those weeds!” The farmer said, “No, everything I did was good. We have an enemy; an enemy compromised our field.” Then they asked, “Should we pull up the weeds?” This is symbolic of them asking, “Should we just get rid of all the evil in the world?” Do you remember what Jesus said? “No, because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest” (Matthew 13:29-30). Jesus is saying that for the time being, good and evil have to co-exist, but not forever. He goes on to say that when the harvest time is ready, “At that time I will tell the harvesters: ‘First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn’” (Matthew 13:30b). What happens to evil? It’s bound and burned. There is punishment; it’s just not yet. Justice delayed is not justice denied. At the right time, God will both reward the righteous and punish the wicked.

We see that as the sixth seal opens. The sixth seal brings the end of the world. Creation unwinds as the sky unravels and the mountains and islands are removed. Justice comes against the wicked: “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!’” (Revelation 6:16).

Seals one through five represent things that happen all throughout history: pride and arrogance, war and violence, oppression and evil, hardship and disease, religious persecution—and the Christians are suffering during all of it. With the sixth seal, at just the right time, God responds: he brings judgment to the earth. People will have to look a righteous God in the face and deal with the consequences of all the evil they committed against his world and his people. Can you imagine Hitler and Stalin standing before God and having to cower in fear? Can you imagine kidnappers and slave traders and human traffickers standing before God and having to cower in fear? Those who have murdered and raped and pillaged, they all have to appear before God. They ask for the mountains and rocks to fall on them so they don't have to look God in the eye. Then they ask a pivotal question, a question you want to be sure to write down or underline or highlight in your Bible: "For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?" (Revelation 6:17).

When Jesus returns, and judgment falls against humanity, and wrath comes, and people cower in fear, who can stand? Who can stand? We see two pictures that answer that question. First, Revelation 7:3: "'Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.'" Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel." These 144,000 represent all of God's people alive on earth. The New Testament teaches us again and again that if you believe in Jesus, you are the true Israel; if you have the faith of Abraham, you are Abraham's offspring, you are God's chosen people. You and me, Christians gathered in all the churches around our city, around the state, around the country, around the world. Before judgment comes, before God's wrath falls down, what happens to God's people? They "put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." This is a way of setting Christians apart, of marking them for protection.

If you go to watch the Indianapolis Colts practice, you're going to see that all the defensive players wear one color jersey (blue), all the offensive players wear a different color jersey (white), and the quarterback, the guy throwing the ball, wears a red jersey. He's the only one on the entire field wearing red. What does it mean? It means, "Don't touch that guy!!!! You can't hit him, you can't tackle him, you can't sack him. He's worth a couple hundred million dollars! The future of our franchise rests on his shoulders. Keep him safe." He's given a special jersey to protect him. That's what happens to God's people here. Before final judgment comes, God puts a seal on his people to keep them safe from his wrath. This is the exact thing that happened in the book of Exodus. The angel of death was going to pass through Egypt and bring judgment and wrath on an evil nation that had enslaved and oppressed God's people for 400 years. But before the angel of death came, what did God tell them to do? To seal their doors with the blood of a lamb. That seal kept them safe. That's what God will do for everyone who is alive on earth when the final day occurs, and God's judgment falls: he will seal them and protect them, so they do not fall under his wrath.

It's not only those who are alive on the earth who are protected from God's judgment. Look at the next section:

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (Revelation 7:9-10)

The previous section shows us the 144,000, all the Christians alive on the earth. Here we see a great multitude that no one could count. These are all the Christians who have ever lived throughout the history of the world. All the people we read about in the New Testament, like Peter, Paul, Andrew, James, Timothy, Aquilla, Pricilla, Lydia. All the people we read about in church history, like Clement, Ignatius,

Athanasius, Justin Martyr, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Whitfield, Billy Graham, and Mother Teresa. Hebrews chapter 11 talks about a great cloud of witnesses, all who have come before us, a group that now represents billions and billions and billions of people.

Do you remember the question that was asked in chapter 6? When final judgment comes, and everyone is terrified and begging for mercy and asking, “Who can stand against God’s judgment?”, what are these people doing in heaven? Standing before the throne and before the Lamb. What does this mean? When final judgment happens, when all humanity is standing before God and giving an account for the life they lived and the decisions they made, and guilty verdicts are declared and punishment is received, and so many are cowering under condemnation and fear, the Christians, instead of being condemned, cowering in fear, and pleading for mercy, will be standing before the throne and singing, “Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb!” Instead of having to give an account for the wrongs we’ve done, we give glory to Jesus for the salvation he has won!

Look at what the next verse says: “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14). All our sins left our clothes dirty and stained, but everyone in heaven has washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Because Jesus took our penalty, we are washed clean, restored, made new, all by his infinite grace. Because of that, what Revelation 7 tells us will be true for us in heaven for all of eternity: “‘Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,’ nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes’” (Revelation 7:16-17). What a beautiful picture? What an incredible promise!

I want to go back to the story I began with today: that family in the hospital, during one of the hardest moments of their life, grief and goodbyes, but singing songs of praise and holding suffering and singing together in perfect unison. How can a family have such great faith in the midst of such a great trial? Because of the promises we just read. All of human history, all of our lives will be filled with hardship. The four horsemen are always riding. God’s people are always under attack; we have an enemy who is constantly trying to devour us! Yet we can sing, because we know that Jesus has triumphed. He has won the victory, and he shares it with all who place their faith in him. Jesus promised: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). This is a very powerful word today to anyone who is suffering. Maybe your spouse has left you. Maybe your spouse has died. Maybe you’ve been in and out of the hospital a dozen times this year and there doesn’t seem to be much hope. Maybe you’ve been falsely accused of a wrong you did not commit, but that accusation is unraveling your life. Maybe your family is falling apart. Maybe depression feels like it’s gnawing away at your insides. Whatever suffering you are experiencing, Jesus not only sees it, but he also sees you, and he promises to see you through it. He not only seals his people for protection, but he also shelters us with his presence, shelters us from the heat, leads us to streams of living water to refresh our soul, and gives us his promise that one day, every tear, every tear will be wiped away from our eyes!