

Revelation 6

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[0 : 00] Jesus, the Lamb who was slain on the cross for sinners, for us, has ascended to heaven. He was raised by the Father on that resurrection morning, received into heaven by the Father on the day of His ascension, and exalted by the Father to the highest place, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.

Jesus the Christ, God's Son and your Savior, is now at the right hand of His Father, receiving the praise and honor He is due. And we gladly join with the heavenly quiet and cry out to Him who sits on the throne of the Lamb, be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever.

All around Him the hosts of heaven lie prostrate at His feet. But what will the newly enthroned King of the universe do?

How will He begin to reign and exercise His kingly authority? This is the moment.

[1 : 30] This is the exciting moment where we find ourselves in John's vision. And John is about to find out and share with us what the Lamb, what Jesus, is about to do.

And the chapter begins, I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Only the Lamb, remember, was worthy to receive the scroll and open the scroll and open the seals.

And now the moment has come when King Jesus, who has received the scroll, is about to open the seals. And you can sense the excitement, the anticipation of the heavenly hosts as they witness what is taking place.

And we are made privy to that pivotal moment as we read of what John was able to discover in His vision about this moment.

Jesus is at work. And it's important as we make our way through this chapter that we ever fix our eyes on Jesus. Fix your eyes on the Lamb and what the Lamb is doing.

[2 : 48] He is an ever-must-be center stage. You know, we read a chapter like the one we've read, and we're met with the four horsemen of the apocalypse as they're commonly described.

And we can be so riveted and enthralled by this imagery that we lose sight of Jesus, who is the one who is and must ever be center stage.

So, try not to be so enthralled by the riveting imagery, by the terrifying display of the horsemen that you lose sight of the one who is at work, of the one who is directing this cosmic drama.

Jesus the Lamb, on His throne and exercising His rule. And what is Jesus doing? Well, what we discover in this chapter and throughout this chapter is that He is opening the seals of the scroll.

And as He opens the seals, so is revealed what is contained in the scroll. But the opening of the seals simply serves to reveal what He is really doing.

[3 : 54] The opening of the seals reveals what Jesus begins to do at His enthronement and will continue to do until His return in glory.

This is the timescale of what is being revealed in this chapter. Jesus is enthroned and throughout His reign until His return, when He will, of course, continue to reign.

But throughout this period, commonly known and described in the Bible as the last days, we are being given an insight into how He exercises that authority in our day and generation also.

And what do we discover? Well, the opening of the seals reveals three activities of Jesus as He exercises His sovereign and gracious rule.

Now, I don't think we are to understand that what we find in this chapter of Revelation is an exhaustive description of all that Jesus does, but it is a description. It does reveal part of what He does and part of what is central to what He does and the manner in which He rules.

[5 : 05] And what are these three activities that we discover? Well, let me just give titles to each of them. And the first certainly won't be immediately obvious what that means, so we'll have to think about it a little bit further.

But let me just say what the three things are, and then we'll consider each of them in turn. First of all, we can say that what we discover in this chapter is that Jesus sovereignly releases the horsemen.

There, riding on these horses that we read of, He sovereignly releases the horsemen to execute His purposes. And the first four seals reveal to us in turn each of these horsemen and their respective horses and the mission that they perform.

But then we're revealed, or we are given insight into another activity of Jesus, and that is that He graciously comforts His faithful martyrs.

And we discover that as the fifth seal is opened. But then finally, the sixth seal is opened by the Lamb, by Jesus, and in the opening of that seal, Jesus terrifyingly, solemnly reveals His glory.

[6 : 20] And this, as we'll discover, is pointing forward to a day that is yet to come. The first two, the first five seals, but the first two activities relate to what Jesus is doing in the here and now, throughout this period in redemptive history.

And the final activity points forward to what we sometimes speak of as the last day, as opposed to the last days. So, let's think of these each in turn.

First of all, Jesus sovereignly, the Lamb sovereignly, releases the horsemen to execute His purposes. These are the four seals opened, as recorded for us in verses 1 to 8 of chapter 6 of Revelation.

Now, to understand what's going on, we've read the chapter, but to try and understand what's going on, and what these verses reveal, we need to pose and answer a few questions. I think it's only right to acknowledge at this point that it's unwise to be overly confident in our interpretation of every detail of what we find in this chapter, indeed, throughout Revelation.

But I think we can be confident, indeed, we ought to be confident, in grasping and seeing the big picture and the big truths that this vision reveals for us.

[7 : 42] The first question we can maybe pose to help us draw out the truths is this, who are the horsemen that are spoken on? There in these verses, we have these four horsemen, these four riders, as I say, commonly known and maybe unhelpfully described as the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

But we have four riders on four horses. Who are they? I think we need to see the four riders as brothers in arms who work together, and together they wreak destruction and death on the earth. They are bent and intent on evil. They are satanic in nature. They are agents of Satan, the one who we know has been a murderer from the beginning, and they share in that lust for blood and for death and for destruction.

This is who they are. What do they do? What do these riders do, these horsemen? What do they do? Well, much is said of what they do, but we can summarize it all in a very short and brutal sentence.

They kill. That's what they do. They kill. They destroy. Their goal is destruction and death. And each of the horsemen plays their ruthless part in this macabre mission.

[9 : 10] We can look at each of them in turn. And here, given the manner in which we're going to be treating this chapter, we really need to just run through the description that we have here of these four horsemen and their horses.

First of all, we're introduced to this white horse and its rider there in verse 2. And he is described as a conqueror bent on conquest.

And this conquest, it would seem, is secured as it ordinarily is by military might. Indeed, we're told of how he is holding a bow, a weapon of war.

However, this horseman throughout history has employed many human accomplices to secure his objective of conquest.

And even today, we see his hand at work. As we look around the world we live in, we see how emperors and kings and powers seek to conquer and extend their frontiers and their borders and gain and garner more and more power and authority.

[10 : 19] And they conquer and they kill in the pursuing of their objectives. And they're doing the work of this horseman riding on the white horse of conquest.

But then we're introduced to another horse and another rider, the fiery red horse spoken of in verse 4. The crimson red of shed blood.

And this horseman is hell-bent on removing peace from the earth. That's the language that is used. He was given power to take peace from the earth. This horseman is intent and adept at generating rivalries and conflicts and turmoil and looking on with devilish satisfaction as, to use the very words of the vision, people kill each other.

And again, we look around our world and we acknowledge that this is the world we live in. People kill each other in so many ways. In wars between nations, in civil unrest, in gang warfare, in family feuds, and we could go on.

People kill each other. And this horseman, in ways and by means that we are not privy to, seeks to provoke such killing in the world.

[11 : 39] And as he does, the blood flows from generation to generation, from century to century. There is no stopping the flow of blood. The white horse, the fiery red horse.

But then we're introduced in verse 5 to the black horse and its rider. And the rider, somewhat intriguingly, is holding a pair of scales in his hand. And a voice announces what it is that he is weighing.

And the scales reveal the weight of wheat that can be purchased by a day's wages or by a denarius. And we're told that that day's wages is only able to purchase one quart or one kilo of wheat.

What is being announced by this? Well, that amount of wheat for a day's wages, and different calculations are proposed, but we can say that at most it was a tenth of what would be expected.

A day's wages would have been expected to be able to purchase ten times what it is able to purchase, as announced by the voice of the one declaring what the scales reveal.

[12 : 50] The scales then reveal times of economic crisis and ravaging inflation, times when hunger stalks at the door and famine holds nations in its grip.

People work, and yet what they earn is not sufficient to feed their own families, and so they go hungry. And notice how the horsemen work together.

You know, the conquest and the warfare that we've already spoken of, represented by the white horse and the fiery red horse, they are often, in reality, in history, the precursors of and the cause of economic crisis and meltdown.

Again, we see it all around us. We see it in every generation, including our own. Perhaps the most intriguing detail in what is said of this third rider and his horse, and especially of the scales that he employs.

Perhaps the most intriguing detail is the reference to the oil and the wine. Notice there we have this intriguing instruction, do not damage the oil and the wine. Now, this might be suggesting that even in times of war and famine, the powerful and the wealthy still cling to their wealth, represented by the oil and the wine, while the poor, living on the wheat and the barley, they perish.

[14 : 16] Or perhaps the idea is that the conquering armies hold back from destroying the olive trees and the vines because of their financial worth. If the vision were delivered today, perhaps in place of olive trees and vines, we would read of oil fields and power stations.

Don't destroy them. Don't touch them. They can provide us with economic boom and resources. In any case, the third horseman brings chaos, brings economic meltdown, rampant inflation, hunger and famine and death, always death.

The one recurring reality in each of the horsemen is that they are the bringers of death. And then we have the fourth seal and the fourth horse and its rider, the pale horse, in verses 7 and 8.

The pale or sickly green color of the horse represents the color of illness or perhaps even of a corpse. It's not surprising given how the rider is then identified.

Its rider was named death. And Hades, the abode of the dead, followed close behind. And the open seal, this opened fourth seal, reveals the staggering scale of death that has been rigged on the world.

[15 : 36] A quarter of the earth massacred by the horsemen and their accomplices, wittingly or unwittingly, by sword, by famine, by plague, by wild beasts.

And the imagery of these verses is the stuff of horror films, and yet what is described is the stuff of history. In every generation, we witness and experience these realities, these disasters.

In every generation, conquest and warfare and famine and plague harvest their victims, and they do so today. They do so in our world with all its advances and all its pomp and all its wealth.

All of these realities we witness today. We need only watch the news today, and we will see that all of these things are a reality today in our world.

The horsemen continue to bring death and destruction. Well, really all we've done is draw out and describe what is said in these verses, but all of this leads us to the big question.

[16 : 49] It leads us to the critical question. It leads us to the very difficult question, the question that we cannot and must not avoid. What has the Lamb to do with all these evil forces of death and destruction?

What has Jesus got to do with all of this death and destruction? How can He be party to or involved in or even connected to all of this chaos and destruction?

What has Jesus got to do with all of this? What has the Lamb got to do with all of this? Well, I think the answer is twofold, and the two elements of the answer are very connected.

First of all, the Lamb, He governs them. He governs the riders. He governs the horsemen. But then also, He uses the horsemen.

He's not the author of the evil that they perpetrate. He's not morally responsible for the wickedness that they are guilty of. But He does govern them, and He does use them.

[17 : 58] And let's think of these two aspects of Jesus' involvement, if you wish. First of all, He governs the horsemen. The language of the vision that we haven't highlighted thus far, but that we're going to now, the language of the vision repeatedly points to the Lamb as in control and governing the actions of the horsemen.

Notice the two key elements. Even as we read the passage, you maybe notice this recurring reality, that for each horseman, one of the living creatures who serve and worship the Lamb, we've been introduced to them already, calls come, and so releases the horseman to its destructive mission. The horseman cannot move an inch without the authorizing call or permission of the Lamb through the living creatures. And so it is the Lamb who is in control.

It is the Lamb who governs the horseman. But then also we notice time and time again, in each of the four horsemen, we have the language of given. To each of the horsemen that is given, the means or the power to exercise their deadly mission.

Notice in verse 2, the rider of the white horse is given a crown. In verse 4, the rider of the fiery red horse is given power. In verse 5, the rider of the black horse is holding a pair of scales that we can, by implication, take, have been given to him.

[19 : 31] And then the rider of the final horse, of the pale horse, he is given power over a quarter of the world's population.

They are given power. And who gives this power? Well, it is the Lamb. The Lamb alone has the authority and the resources to give. But notice that this giving by the Lamb not only enables the horsemen, but also, crucially, limits the horsemen.

They can go so far and no further. The image or the picture of a quarter of the earth falling victim to the destruction of the horsemen is a brutal picture to paint, and yet it is clear, a quarter and no further.

They are given the power, but the very fact that they are given the power means that that power is restricted. It is limited by the one who grants it, the Lamb who is seated on the throne.

So he governs them. But also, and this is really coming to the heart of the matter, he uses them. He uses the horsemen. You see, when we read this, perhaps I don't know about you, even as we read the chapter, as we consider what it is saying to us, do we in our interior, do we cry out, why?

[20 : 53] Why would the Lamb that was slain, our precious Savior, why would He give these horsemen the power to kill and destroy? And we recoil at the thought.

But He does so because He governs them that He might use them to carry out His purposes. And what possible purpose could this be?

Well, His twofold purpose of judging His enemies and refining His saints. You see, the horsemen, though agents of Satan and allied to Satan, are agents of the Lamb's judgment.

The imagery of the vision is replete with echoes and allusions to the language and reality of God's judgment in the Old Testament. For reasons of time, we're limiting ourselves to one of those references or allusions, the passage that we read in Ezekiel chapter 14.

There in that chapter, we have presented the picture of these four plagues represented here in Revelation by these four horsemen on their horses, bringing famine and conquest and death and disease.

[22 : 09] This is God's judgment on a rebellious and wicked world. And His judgment is executed by the means of these horsemen. Now, we may struggle to process and to accept that reality, but we ought not to be surprised.

We ought not to be surprised that the Lamb would use evil forces to execute His just and holy temporal judgment on evil and evildoers.

It has ever been so. In the Old Testament, we often see how God used pagan kings and evil empires to bring judgment on His own people.

Now, in these last days, these satanic forces, who in turn employ human kings and empires are used by the Lamb to execute judgment on the wicked are the inhabitants of the earth as they are described in this chapter.

But the horsemen are also agents of God's refining and purifying of His saints. The very suffering that they bring that is suffered by all or by many is suffered perhaps particularly by the saints so often because these horsemen have a particular hatred for the saints.

[23 : 26] And so often, it is the saints who suffer most acutely. But that very suffering for all its evil and its horror is used by God to refine and purify His people, refined in the crucible of persecution and oppression.

These horsemen represent what the Lamb is ever doing. Not all that He is doing, but what the Lamb is ever doing throughout these last days in every generation, including our own.

Now, as I repeat, this is not often or not easy for us to accept. We struggle to get to grips with the Lamb, the One who loved me and gave Himself for me acting in this way. But the core truth we need to cling to is that the Lamb is in control and that He exercises His control wisely and justly and graciously in favor of His people.

Much more briefly, let's just notice what else Jesus is doing as He governs from His throne. Well, He also graciously comforts His faithful martyrs.

It's the fifth seal here in the chapter in verses 9 to 11. When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain. What is revealed by the opening of the fifth seal?

[24 : 44] Again, let's pose a couple of questions to draw out what is being said. Who are the souls in the vision? Well, we're told the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word and the testimony they had maintained.

These are the martyrs of the faith throughout history in every generation, including our own, and in horrendous numbers in our own generation. These are the women and men who are killed by the horsemen and their accomplices because of their love, thought, and loyalty to the Lamb, to Jesus. And where are these souls? Well, they are in heaven. That alone is a source of comfort for the readers of the vision. They are in heaven. They are before the Lamb. They are with the Lamb. But not only are they in heaven, but we're told more specifically that they are under the altar. Here, a clear allusion to the temple. What does this mean or imply that these souls would be martyred are under the altar?

The heavenly altar, and remember that the earthly temple, as we're told by the writer to the Hebrews, is a kind of copy of the heavenly temple. The heavenly altar represents the altar of incense in the temple that stood at the entrance to the Holy of Holies.

[25 : 58] And at the altar of incense, two key activities took place. Incense was offered to God as a sweet-smelling savor, and the blood of the atoning sacrifice was offered on the Day of Atonement to allow for the high priest to enter the Holy of Holies in representation of God's people.

And the souls of the martyrs are under this altar from which we can perhaps tentatively draw two conclusions. Their very lives and their very deaths are seen by the Lamb as a sacrifice of service. They are as incense in the presence of God. They are pleasing to God. But then secondly, their presence before God and the Lamb is not secured by their shed blood.

Theirs was not an atoning sacrifice. It was a sacrifice of service, but not an atoning sacrifice. Their presence before God is secured by the blood shed by the Lamb who was slain at the altar at Calvary.

They are, we all are, under the protection of that altar and the blood shed on that tree, on that cross. What are they doing, these souls?

[27 : 11] Well, we're told that they are crying out to the Lamb. They cry out to the Lamb. How long, sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?

this is no cry for hateful revenge, but rather, this is a cry for justice. This is a cry for justice.

This is a worthy and pure and right cry for justice. This is a call for God's name and God's people who bear His name to be vindicated and avenged by the exercise and execution of God's holy justice.

How long, O Lord? And how does the Lamb respond to their cry? Well, we read the answer there in the chapter. He gives them a white robe representing, probably here, victory and vindication. They were shamed and slaughtered by the enemies of God, but they are vindicated and clothed by the Lamb of God. But not only does He give them this white robe, He tells them to wait a little longer.

[28 : 17] Their cry is, how long? And the answer relates to the nature of their question. He says, wait a little longer. The Lamb understands and sympathizes with the urgency of their cry, but He governs the times and they need to wait a little longer, trusting in His perfect rule over history.

And as they have died, others will die, but only until He determines. And those who are yet to die will, when they do, join their brothers and sisters in heaven and be similarly vindicated and clothed. And this advice to the martyrs in heaven is sound advice for us down here. In the midst of all manner of evil and injustice and pain and confusion and suffering, the Lamb whispers to us, He says to us, wait a little longer.

Evil will not always flourish. Death will not always reign. Injustice will not always rage rampant. Wait a little longer.

What does the Lamb do from His throne? He releases the horsemen to accomplish His purposes. He comforts His suffering people. But finally, He terrifyingly, terrifyingly reveals His glory as the sixth steel is opened as described to us from verse 12 through to the end of the chapter.

[29 : 47] The opening of the sixth steel does look forward to a future day in the language of the prophet Joel, the great and dreadful day of the Lord. The events revealed by the opening of the sixth steel are subsequent to the completing of the number of the martyrs that has just been referred to, which only serves to further confirm that we are to view these as the events not of the last days, this whole period of redemptive history, but of the last day.

And we can quickly divide what is said here at the close of this chapter in two parts. The events described in the response of the inhabitants of the earth, of those who belong to earth as opposed to belonging to heaven.

And the events described in verses 12 to 14, well, the language is vivid and terrifying, and in its totality describes the destruction of the old heaven and earth to make way for the establishment of a new heaven and earth, though that is not mentioned at this point in the vision.

More to follow on this. The scene painted is of cosmic meltdown, and this is what awaits on the last day. And how will those who are the inhabitants of the earth, who are married to this earth, who have not gained that heavenly perspective as they would by trusting in Jesus, what is their response?

Well, what are we told of in verses 15 to 17? The people that are spoken of in these verses, they are all those who refuse to bow the knee to King Jesus, and they are to be found in every sector of society, the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hidden caves and among the rocks of the mountains.

[31 : 36] Unbelief knows of no social barriers. It crosses over every sector of society, every social divide. The great division in our world is not between rich and poor, between powerful and oppressed, between north and south.

It is between those who embrace Jesus and those who reject Jesus. That is the great divide. That is the cosmic divide. Do you embrace Jesus or do you reject Jesus?

On that day, that is all that will matter. Not your wealth, not your education, not any other thing you can imagine. Did you embrace Jesus? Did you trust in Jesus? Did you render and surrender your life to Jesus or did you reject His loving advances?

That is the great divide. And what do they do on that great and dreadful day? Well, I said that this third activity of Jesus is to terrifyingly reveal His glory, and indeed, they see the Lamb.

In verse 16 we read, they called and 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. Hide us from His face.

[32 : 45] Hide us from Him. We can see Him as we've never seen Him before. Hide us from Him. They see the Lamb in all His terrifying glory.

They experience His wrath. They begin to experience His wrath. The wrath of the Lamb. Yes, of the Lamb. He's settled in intense hatred for all that is evil.

They call out to the mountains and exercise in futility if ever there was one. For as John, or the narrator of the vision, rightly concludes at the very end of the chapter, who can stand?

Who can stand? Of course, the answer to that question, who can stand, will come in the following chapter where we find the redeemed standing before the Lamb.

In chapter 7 and verse 9, and of course, we'll come to that subsequently on another occasion, but we read there in verse 9 of chapter 7, 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.

[33 : 50] The question had been, who can stand? Well, here they are standing, enabled to stand by the Lamb, equipped to stand, granted the right and the status to stand by the one they stand before.

And they discover that the promise of God through the prophets Isaiah is fulfilled. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken, nor my covenant of peace be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

So we have a sweeping run through this part of the vision, and let's just draw the key threads together.

The Lamb who was slain, Jesus, King Jesus, is in control of history. He's in control of the four living creatures.

Those creatures who praise and worship Him, who are on His side, He's in control of them, and they do His bidding. But the wonderful and the glorious and the difficult truth, but the glorious truth, is that He is also in control of the four horsemen.

[35 : 10] They also do His bidding. He is in control of history. He is in control of history. And He governs history for the good of His people and for the outworking of His just and gracious purposes.

And we don't understand the ins and the outs, and there's much that we struggle to accept, but we trust that He is in control. Then also we draw out this wonderful truth that the eyes of the Lamb are upon His own.

The ears of the Lamb are attentive to their cry. Those martyred for the faith and all those who seek to faithfully serve Him in the midst of pain and suffering, He hears their cry.

He hears their protest. He hears their call for justice. But then, as the sixth seal is open, we are reminded solemnly that the wrath of the Lamb will be revealed on that last great day.

And the question for each of us here this morning is this. Will you call out for mercy today? Or will you join in that futile call to the mountains to hide you on that great and dreadful day?

[36 : 24] Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Jesus. We thank You for the Lamb that was slain. We thank You for the salvation that He has secured for us.

We who are sinners, we who are deserving of judgment and wrath and punishment, and yet as we put our trust in Jesus, so we are spared and delivered. He bears that which we deserve.

and He liberates us and frees us from the judgment and the punishment that we ought to receive. And we thank You for this.

Help us to trust in Jesus, to look to Him for mercy and forgiveness that He is ever ready to grant.

And pray, deliver us from the folly of finding ourselves on that great and dreadful day with the rebellious hordes crying out to the mountains, hide us from the one seated on the throne, from the face of the one seated on the throne, and from the Lamb.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.