It Will Get Worse Before It Gets Better

Revelation 6

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| **Natural Divisions** | * Revelation 6:1-8 As the Lamb opens the first four seals of the scroll, four horsemen ride out from the throne room of God bring conquest, war, famine, and death upon the earth.
* Revelation 6:9-11 When the Lamb opens the fifth seal, the souls of faithful Christian martyrs cry out to God for justice and retribution against those who had slain them.
* Revelation 6:12-16 When the Lamb opens the sixth seal, natural disasters break out on the earth and in the sky, and all men recognize these events as the wrath of the Lamb.
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| **Summary Sentence** | As the Lamb opens six of the seals on the scroll, a voice from the throne unleashes conquest, war, famine, death, and finally earth-shattering disasters as a summary vision of God’s judgment against sin and ungodliness.  |
| **Central Idea** |  God is making all things right |

Twenty-five years ago, my husband and I experienced a dramatic, unforeseen upheaval in our lives. Our home isn’t large, but it’s tall. It’s three-stories tall. It’s built like a Saltine box on its end. The top floor is just our bedroom, a closet, and a very small bathroom.

In 1984, we left Austin for five days to spend the Thanksgiving holiday with friends in Dallas. Our older son had just turned two, and I was pregnant with our younger son. Just after we left Austin, a water line that was connected to the third-floor toilet came loose, and there was water gushing into our house for five days.

The destruction was overwhelming. When we returned from our Thanksgiving holiday, we couldn’t even open the front door, because the weight of water on the third floor had caused the ceilings on the second floor to collapse, and then the weight of the water on the second floor caused all the ceilings rooms on the first floor to collapse. It looked like a bomb had gone off inside our house.

It seemed that almost everything in our house had been damaged or destroyed by the water. Furthermore, over the next several months, we discovered that a result of the fallen water line was that our home became thoroughly polluted—polluted by mold and mildew. It was everyplace.

Repairing the damage from the fallen water line, and removing the corruption of mold took longer than it had taken to build the house in the first place.

By God’s grace, we had wonderful homeowner’s insurance with State Farm, and we found a wonderful company to do the repairs. We were greatly blessed in that. At the beginning of the repair process, the owner of the remodeling company said two things. First, *“let me assure you: when it’s all done, it’s going to be right. Your home will be what you want it to be.”* Second. *“It’s going to get worse before it gets better.”* He was right on both counts.

As we delve into the book of Revelation, we consider a vaguely similar but far, far worse situation. Our home was damaged by a fallen water line. Back in Garden of Eden, however, all of creation was damaged by the fall of man. Our home was polluted and corrupted by mold and mildew. Back in the Garden of Eden, all of creation became polluted and corrupted by sin.

As my husband and I planned the repair of our home, our excellent remodeling team assured us that in the end they would make everything right in our home, but that it was going to get worse before it got better.

Similarly, as we look at the Bible, we find that the same two assurances are true with respect to the course of this fallen world. First, the Bible assures us that **God is going to make everything right**. And second, we see in the Bible that because of the corruption of sin in our world, it’s going to get worse before it gets better.

Let’s review what we’ve seen thus far in the book of Revelation. In the first century, many of the people of God were suffering. These were people of faith. These were Christians who had come to understand the gospel. These first-century Christians understood the good news—that Jesus had died on the cross for a purpose. Jesus had died in order for His death to pay the penalty for our sins. Because Jesus paid our penalty, we—the people of faith—are adopted into God’s family as children of God.

The first-century church had an *expectation* that because they were God’s own children, that they would be spared from any kind of discomfort or disappointment or distress. The first-century believers had an *expectation* that life would be trouble-free for them because their God—our God—was in control.

They had an *expectation* of an easy life, but that wasn’t happening. Life was hard for them. There was suffering. There was persecution. The world wasn’t the way it was supposed to be. They understood the Old Testament promises that one day **God would make all things right**, but how was that going to happen? Why were they suffering? It had been sixty years since the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and the world was still not the way it was supposed to be.

And so, God gave His people this book of Revelation. The book of Revelation was given to comfort God’s people as they live through suffering. This book was given to encourage believers throughout the ages as they live their lives in a world that is not the way it’s supposed to be. Revelation was given to assure God’s people that one day, **God will make all things right**.

One day, **God will make all things right**. One day, God will establish His eternal Kingdom. One day, God will build His promised future Kingdom on a renewed, and cleansed, and a re-created earth. But as we come to chapter 6 of Revelation, we see that even though **God will one day make all things right**; nevertheless, it’s going to get worse before it gets better.

Open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 6.

Last week, we continued in our study of John’s glorious vision of the heavenly dwelling place of God. Last week we saw that the One who was seated on the throne was holding a scroll sealed with seven seals. The text doesn’t tell us explicitly what that scroll represents. We don’t know specifically—we don’t know with certainty—what the scroll represents. but we saw that there was a great deal of anticipation in the throne room. All of the angelic hosts were eager for the scroll to be opened. This scroll is important, but who is worthy to open the scroll?

We learned last week that there’s only one living being who is worthy to open the scroll, and that living being is Jesus. Only Jesus is worthy to open the scroll. In chapter 5, Jesus appears as a lamb, a sacrificial animal. Jesus appears as the Lamb of God—the Lamb who has been slain as a sacrifice, and yet the Lamb continues to stand. Jesus is the Lamb of God, standing in victory, because His sacrifice conquered the power of sin and death for God’s people.

Only Jesus is worthy to open the scroll.

Why is Jesus worthy? Revelation 5:9 says that Jesus is worthy to open the scroll because of what Jesus did at the cross. Jesus was slain, and by His blood Jesus ransomed people from every tribe and language and people and nation. These ransomed people—these people of faith—are to be a kingdom and priests, and one day they will reign with Jesus on the cleansed and recreated earth.

Jesus is worthy to open the scroll because of His death and resurrection. Although Jesus died in the first century, His death provides the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Jesus’ death on the cross provides the gift of salvation for people of faith from the day of creation until the future day of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The scroll may be opened because Christ’s atoning work is finished. The scroll may be opened because the ransom price for people of faith has been paid. I believe that the scroll represents the course of history from the time of Christ’s death and resurrection until the time of Christ’s return. Let me say that again: I believe that the scroll represents the course of history from the day of Christ’s death until the day of Christ’s return. Because the way of salvation has been provided, the scroll may be opened, and the work of remodeling and repair has already begun.

One day **God will make all things right**. One day Jesus will return to judge the wicked, to recreate the earth, and to welcome the people of faith into the Kingdom of God. But until that day, the world is fallen; the world is corrupt; the world is not the way it’s supposed to be. **One day God will make all things right; but until that day, it’s going to get worse before it gets better**.

Beginning in chapter 6, the Lamb begins to break the seals so that the scroll may be opened and the course of history may proceed toward it’s good and glorious conclusion.

As the Lamb breaks each of the seals, John receives a vision. John sees a vision of life in a fallen world. John sees a vision of the sorts of events that characterize life on earth from the day of Christ’s resurrection until the day Jesus returns in glory.

As Jesus breaks the seals, John sees visions of God’s ongoing judgment against sin. God isn’t disengaged with the course of this world. God is even now shaping the events of life to demonstrate the damaging consequences of sin and corruption. God isn’t in the business of ignoring evil; God stands opposed to evil. And so, as each of the seals is broken, we see God’s ongoing judgment against sin in our world. As each of the seals is broken, we see God’s continuing limited judgment against the sin that has characterized our world from the time of the fall until this day.

As the first four seals are opened, four horsemen are sent out from the throne room of God, and each horseman is riding a horse of a different color.

In that day, horses were instruments of conflict and war; horses were not means of transportation. In the ancient Near East, people traveled by foot or riding on the back of a donkey. A horse, however, was used by armies. A horse was an instrument of war.

As the first-century reader learned of the vision of the four horsemen, he would immediately recall a similar vision from the book of Zechariah. In Zechariah, the prophet is given a vision of chariots drawn by horses of different colors. These chariots were sent by God to defeat the enemies of God’s people. The chariots in Zechariah demonstrated God’s ability to overcome evil and to bring about victory on behalf of the people of faith. The chariots in Zechariah affirmed that God has sovereign power over all the earth.

As the first-century reader of the book of Revelation remembered the teaching of Zechariah, that reader would be reminded that God is absolutely sovereign. God is able to utterly defeat His enemies; and God has promised beforehand that in His perfect timing, He will do it. **God will make all things right**.

**God will make all things right, but it’s going to get worse before it gets better**.

As the first four seals are opened, four horsemen are sent out from the throne room of God, and each horseman is riding a horse of a different color. These are spiritual beings sent from God to bring ongoing limited judgment to a world that stands in opposition to God and to His Christ. These horsemen bring judgment and destruction to a world that stands in opposition to the people of faith.

The first rider rides a white horse, and he rides out conquering, and to conquer. There are two general ways of understanding the meaning of this first rider. There are two ways of viewing this conquering horseman, and both views (though they’re very different) have strong Scriptural and historical support.

One view derives from the fact that the word for *conquer* is the same word that is translated *“overcome”* in the letters to the churches in chapters 2 and 3. And so, one might argue that the churches are exhorted to be overcomers, and here we see that God has sent a spiritual *overcomer* from the throne room—an *overcomer* sent out by the Lamb. One might argue that this *overcomer* is the message of the gospel—it is the power of God for salvation. As a result of the sacrifice of the Lamb, the gospel has been sent out into all the earth. And we know that the gospel overcomes the stronghold of the powers of darkness. This view is a very helpful view and a very reasonable view.

A second view emphasizes the fact that the four horsemen seem to have a similar purpose in their missions—they seem to be instruments of judgment. They seem to be messengers of destruction, of violence, and of misery. Although the word for *conquer* is often used in Revelation in a positive sense; it’s also used in a negative sense. It’s easy to see that whereas conquering evil is a good thing; conquering your neighbor is a bad thing. And so there are two views—two very reasonable and justifiable views.

I’m going to be reminding you several times this year that there are several *valid* approaches to interpreting this book. Revelation is hard, and whatever view of this book that you’ve been taught, be aware that there are many, many Christian scholars throughout history who have held a different view.

Whatever interpretation you’ve embraced, be aware that there are many, many Christians who are just as committed to the inerrancy of Scripture as you are, who have held a different interpretation.

Whatever your view of the meaning of the images in Revelation, there are many, many Christians who are just as careful and scholarly in their study of the material as you are, who hold a different view.

I urge you—don’t let your conclusions regarding the interpretation of Revelation be a cause of division between you and your brothers and sisters in Christ. There are several valid approaches to interpreting this book.

My view of the horsemen is that the four horsemen picture God’s ongoing limited judgment against the godlessness of our world. I believe that the horsemen were sent out in the first century, and that the horsemen ride today. Our world today continually and repeatedly suffers the destruction of conquest, war, famine, natural disasters, disease, and death. The vision of the horsemen represents the ongoing judgment that has been operational in our world from the first century until this day. With the permission of God—under the direction of the Lamb—suffering continues to be a part of life in this present age.

**One day God will make all things right; but until that day, it’s going to get worse before it gets better**.

The first horseman represents conquest, as nations gobble up other nations; as institutions of power expand their control; as we see hostile takeovers of struggling corporations. The second horseman rides a red horse, and he represents the curse of war. The third horseman rides a black horse, and he represents scarcity of food, whether from famine or from economic collapse. The fourth horseman rides a pale horse, and he represents death.

Death is the ultimate curse that man has inherited from the fall. Death is the ultimate curse we face because of the depravity of man. Jesus has overcome the power of sin and death, but the full realization of Christ’s victory will not be complete until His return to establish the Kingdom of God. And so we long for that day. We long for the coming Kingdom, but in this present age, death is still a reality.

Look at verses 7 and 8. *“When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, "Come." I looked, and behold, a pale horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death; and Hades was following with him. Authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth.”*

Throughout the Old Testament, when God brought judgment against the enemies of His people, His instruments of judgment were often characterized as the sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts. The terms seem archaic to us, but the reality of life is that even in this modern world, these elements bring sorrow and misery every day. We have not purged the world of war. We have not eliminated famine. We have not overcome illness. We have not even rendered harmless the wild beasts of the earth—whether they be snakes, or bacteria, or rabid dogs.

The four horsemen represent the way things are in a world corrupted by sin. The four horsemen represent the way things are prior to the return of Christ. Our world will not be cleansed of evil until Jesus returns to judge the wicked and to welcome the people of faith into the Kingdom of God.

As the Lamb broke the fifth seal, John saw a new vision. Look at verses 9-10. *“When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before You will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"”*

These are people of faith who’ve died for the cause of Christ from the beginning of the church age until today. In a world that is corrupted by godlessness, there has always been persecution against God’s people. We don’t see it in 21st century America—we live in a sheltered bubble of religious freedom—a situation that is very rare in the course of history, but persecution and martyrdom continue to be a reality in other parts of the world.

John’s vision reveals a great multitude of those who gave the last full measure of devotion for the cause of Christ. They lost their lives on earth, but they are protected and honored in the heavenly dwelling place of God.

These martyrs are said to be beneath the altar in the heavenly tabernacle. Just as the blood of sacrificial animals is found under the altar in the Old Testament, this vision demonstrates that these lives have been a sacrificial offering to God. It’s not that their sacrifice took away their sin; it’s only Christ’s sacrifice that removes sin—but because these men and women are people of faith, the sacrifice of their lives is a worthy and precious offering of worship to God.

As we see the vision of the martyrs, we hear their cry for justice. They long for the coming of final justice. They long for the coming of the perfect righteousness of God’s eternal Kingdom. Look at verse 11 to see what happens next. *“These martyrs were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.”*

God is sovereign over the course of this world. God knows the course of each of our lives. God knows when the last one of His people will have come into His fold. This vision of the martyrs under the altar reveals that although the final judgment will surely come, it will not come until the last martyr has died. It will not come until the last believer has placed His faith in Christ.

One day, when the timing is right, Jesus will return. In that day, when the timing is perfect, Jesus will return to cleanse this world of evil and to establish God’s Kingdom. In that day, **God will make all things right, but until that day dawns, things will get worse before they get better**.

Beginning in verse 12, we see a vision very different from the visions that have come before. This vision is different because it encompasses the whole earth and the cosmos. The judgments that were portrayed by the four horsemen were limited in their destruction. This judgment is not limited. The judgments portrayed by the four horsemen seem familiar to us; this judgment is unprecedented.

This vision, beginning in verse 12, describes a judgment so extensive that it has never occurred before. What we see in this vision is the destruction of the earth in the day of the return of Christ.

Look at verses 12-14. *“When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a great wind. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.”*

As the Lamb opens the sixth seal, there is a vision of a world-wide earthquake. According to this vision, the entire earth shakes; every mountain and island is displaced. The sun turns turn black; the moon reflects no light; the stars fall from the sky. The heavens are rolled back like a scroll. This vision reveals the great and dreadful day of the Lord. This vision portrays the return of Christ to judge the earth and to establish God’s Kingdom.

The prophet Joel describes this day in Joel 2:31. *“The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.”*

This terrifying event was described by our Lord in the book of Matthew. The disciples asked Jesus what would be the sign of His return; what would be the sign of the end of this age. Jesus described that day in Matthew 24:29-31. Jesus said this: *“Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”*

One day Jesus will return. In that day, Jesus will cleanse this world of evil and will establish the Kingdom of God. In that day, **God will make all things right**.

Look at verses 15-17. *“Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"”* This is the day of judgment. It is an utterly terrifying event. All of those who have lived in disregard of the Savior now find that with Christ’s return they face destruction.

The great day of the wrath of the Lamb has come, and who can stand? Who will survive? Who will be redeemed? Who will be welcomed into God’s Kingdom? Chapter 7 answers that question, and we’ll talk about that next week.

We live in a world that was horribly damaged by the fall of man. We live in a world that is utterly corrupted by sin. Our world is not the way it’s supposed to be, but God has promised that one day **God will make all things right**. Things may get worse before they get better, but we can be confident that one day the damage from the fall will be reversed. One day sin will be removed, and Jesus will establish the Kingdom of God. **One day God will make all things right**. Let’s close in prayer.