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Revelation 6

Twelfth Message

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WHEN GOD TURNS HIS FACE

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Today is the day you've all been waiting for. Today we come to the seven seals, the beginning of the "good stuff." But I want you to notice that it's been two years since I started this book. I've preached eleven sermons covering five chapters. That's nearly a quarter of the book. These have been vitally important chapters. Yet many people have the impression that the book really begins with the seven seals. You're itching to know what I'm going to say about these seals. If you have come with your charts and your timetables, either to test me against them or to fill in the blanks, then let me disappoint you straight away. What I'm going to say over the next three weeks about the seals has little to do with the charts that are so popular, so you can put them away.

The Book of Revelation contains a series of visions given to John which he was told to write down and send to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. These visions concern both the things which are now and the things which must soon happen (1:1, 19; 4:1; 22:6). I need to say a word about the timeline of Revelation. The narrative sequence of the book is the series of visions, not the content of the visions. John repeatedly writes, "Then I saw," interspersed occasionally with "Then I heard." There is no necessity that the contents of the visions follow the same sequence as the visions themselves. The only chronology John is told is that the things which are now must give way soon to the things which must happen. That word "soon" has remained so for nearly 2000 years.

Chapters 4-16 form a tightly integrated sequence of visions. John is caught up to heaven in a visionary trance. First he sees a throne, with one seated upon it. All of heaven is gathered around this throne in worship of its occupant. In the hand of this occupant he sees a scroll, which presumably contains the program of the things which must happen. But who is able to make these things happen? God could choose to zap the world into order with a snap of his fingers, but that's not how he chooses to operate. He chooses rather to work through the slaughtered lamb. This slain lamb, who has conquered through the shedding of his blood, is thereby worthy both to open the seven seals and to receive the worship of heaven (5:9, 12). We are in a topsy-turvy world where the Lion who has conquered is the Lamb who was slain.

It is never very clear what is actually written on the scroll, and whether the contents of the scroll are actually ever announced. Is the opening of the seals part of the message on the scroll, or is it a prelude? One could argue that the scroll is not open until the seventh seal is broken. Is the content of the scroll revealed after the opening of the seventh seal? But the breaking of the seventh seal brings seven trumpets; one can argue that they function as heralds of the message of the scroll, so that the content of the scroll is not proclaimed until the seventh trumpet is blown: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15). Or is the message of the scroll not revealed until the seventh bowl is poured out? That event brings the great

proclamation, "It is done!" (16:17). The things which must happen have happened.

Even after many years of study, Revelation retains many mysteries. There are plenty of details that are not clear. But the principal messages are abundantly clear. The things which are now will give way to the things which will happen. These things *must* happen, and they must happen *soon*. The day is coming when God will say, "It is done! It has happened!" That's about as much chronology as I'm willing to impose on the book.

The Four Horsemen

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.

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.

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!"

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of 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. (6:1-8 NIV)

The first four seals are presented as a cohesive quartet, as are the first four trumpets and the first four bowls. The breaking of these four seals summons the four horsemen of Durer's famous etching, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.

The account of the breaking of each of the first four seals follows an identical pattern: the Lamb opens a seal, one of the cherubim cries out, "Come!" and out comes a horse with a rider. All of the imagery is drawn from the Old Testament. The imagery of the four horsemen is drawn from Zechariah 1 and 6, where horses of various colors are sent out by the Lord to patrol the four corners of the earth.

The first horseman is mounted on a white horse. Because Jesus later appears as a rider on a white horse (19:11), some people interpret this first horseman as Jesus. But this cannot be so. The four horsemen must be interpreted as a quartet, but Jesus does not belong with the other three. Furthermore, Jesus already has a role in the vision, as

the Lamb who opens each scroll. No, this first horseman represents military conquest. The bow is a symbol of war, and the white horse indicates victory. He rides out as an invader bent on conquest, and is successful in his mission.

The second horseman is mounted on a horse that is red, the color of blood. And blood flows aplenty, as he removes peace so that men kill each other. His large sword is symbolic of this slaughter. The first horseman brings death by external invasion and conquest; this second horseman brings death by internal civil war, by the breakdown of society.

The third horseman rides a black horse. The scales he holds are for measuring out food for purchase. A quart of wheat is enough to feed one person for one day. But it costs a denarius, a day's wage for a laborer. If he chooses to eat rougher food, he can buy enough barley for three people. People have to spend all their money on mere subsistence. But the famine is limited: the olive trees and grape vines are not harmed.

The color of the fourth horse is *chloros*, the pale green color of chlorine, the sickly color of a corpse. His rider is Death. Accompanying him is Hades or Sheol, the abode of the dead. They kill a quarter of the earth by sword, famine, plague and wild animals. In the Old Testament these are the archetypal agents of God's judgment, his "four dreadful judgments" (Ezek 14:21). Though the judgments are terrible, they are limited, affecting only a quarter of the earth.

These four horsemen represent God's judgment upon the world, judgments which prepare the way for the Lord to come. But when do these judgments occur? Are they past, present or future? There are four major opinions: futurist, preterist, historicist and idealist.

The futurist believes that these judgments are all in the future, specifically during the Great Tribulation after the Rapture. Because the Church has been raptured out of the way, Christians do not have to face these judgments. This is the dominant view in America, the view espoused by the *Left Behind* series and countless other books.

The preterist believes that the judgments have all occurred in the past, either prior to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, or prior to the Fall of Rome in 410. It is true that the events symbolized by these horsemen did indeed befall the Roman Empire. A reader at the end of the first century would have recognized the first horseman as a Parthian. Parthia, located in what is today Iran, was the only empire able to stand up to the power of Rome. Parthia was a constant threat on Rome's eastern frontier, and launched several successful invasions into Roman territory. Furthermore, the Parthians soldiers were skilled archers, uniquely able to use their bows while mounted on horseback. Rome brought peace to the Mediterranean, the famous *pax Romana*. But that peace was periodically removed, plunging the Empire into chaos. Ensuring sufficient food supplies to feed the empire was a perennial problem for the emperors; there were periods when grain was scarce and expensive. Plague became a recurring problem, brought back by soldiers who had fought on the northern and eastern frontiers. In recent years there has been a resurgence of the preterist position. While I am willing to accept that the judgments of these horsemen were visited upon Rome, I don't think that exhausts the meaning of the series.

The historicist sees the judgments worked out progressively throughout the whole of church history. This position was popular in the past, but is no longer so.

The idealist views these judgments as typical of all history. This is the view I hold. It is potentially the most troubling view. Preterism relegates these judgments to the distant past, futurism puts them in the indeterminate future. In either case we don't have to face them today. Even historicism dismisses most of the judgments to other times in church history. But idealism says we have to face up to what these horsemen represent throughout history. God is continually intervening in history, bringing judgment upon the world.

Perhaps it's the fact that I'm European that makes me more sympathetic to the idealist view. Throughout much of the 2000 years since Revelation was written, Europe has been wracked by chaos and disorder. At my boarding school in England there was a huge reproduction of Picasso's famous painting *Guernica*, filling a whole wall. For three years I walked by that painting several times a day. It bears grim testimony to the horrors of war.

Here in the U.S. we have been largely immune to terrifying events. We have the occasional hurricane and tornado; we've had scares with AIDS and SARS. But these shake us only temporarily. You have only to look around the world to see God's four dreadful judgments: the sword, famine, plague and wild animals. Yesterday President Bush returned from a five-day visit to Africa. How do you make sense of the terrible chaos of that continent: the brutal civil wars in the Congo and Liberia, the high rate of AIDS in Botswana, the rapacious regimes of many countries, the terrifying diseases that emerge from the jungles? Is this world just random? Is this world absurd? Where is God? Christians have to face up to this. We can't just put our head in the sand and say judgment was in the distant past, or will be in the indeterminate future after the Church has been raptured out of the way. That ignores both the ongoing turmoil in the world and the fact that Christians are caught up in the turmoil alongside non-Christians.

Where is God amidst all this evil? Is he an absentee landowner? Does he care? Has he turned his back? Why doesn't he do something? There is a crucial word, though one easy to miss, which explains where he is. It's the little word *edothē*, meaning "it was given." It's a key word in Revelation: it's used 31 times in the New Testament but 21 of those are in Revelation. A crown was given to the first horsemen. The removal of peace from the earth was given to the second along with a large sword. Authority to kill a quarter of the earth was given to the fourth. Who does the giving? This little word is a circumlocution, a roundabout way of referring to God, the occupant of the throne. Everything begins with God: not just salvation, but also judgment. Where is God? He is on his throne. Why doesn't he do something? He is doing something. Death by the sword, famine, plague, wild animals are indications not of God's absence but of his presence: this is what happens when God turns his face upon a world that has turned its back upon him. This is not a comfortable view; we want to think of God as loving and kind. But any other view is a recipe for despair. If there be no throne at the center, nor an occupant on the throne, nor his superintendence over all things, then this world is absurd.

How Long?

Christians get caught up in these judgments of God just as much as non-Christians. You have only to ask Christians in Africa today. But Christians face a further challenge: they also suffer death for their faith. That's the message of the fifth seal:

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. (6:9-11)

In the Old Testament, the blood of sacrificial animals was thrown upon the altar, where it flowed down into collecting channels underneath. John sees under the altar not the blood of sacrificial bulls and goats, but the martyrs whose death is here regarded as a sacrificial death, as an offering to God. They have been killed because of “the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.” This is language that occurs again and again throughout the book: God’s people are called to hold on to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. That’s all they are asked to do. It is highly likely that they will end up dead for doing so. The Greek word *martys* means witness. It was because so many were killed for their witness that the word came to mean one who is killed for his faith. Being a witness doesn’t mean primarily that you go around sharing *The Four Spiritual Laws*. It means that you hold on to the belief in all that you do that the throne at the center of the universe is in heaven not on earth, that it is occupied by one to whom all worship is due, that it is Jesus Christ who is Lord, that salvation has been won through the blood of the slain Lamb. There are still places in the world where holding on to these facts brings death.

This raises another dilemma for the believer: has God turned his back on the one who has turned his face toward him? If God has established his kingdom on earth, has placed his king on the throne, and has saved his people, why does he allow his people to be killed? Why doesn’t he prevent it, or at least do something to avenge their death? That’s the substance of the prayer of these martyrs: “How long?” How long, O Lord? Why don’t you put things right? Why don’t you bring your judgment upon these killers who seem to be acting with impunity? Their killers are “the inhabitants of the earth,” a term used nine times in the book to refer to those who are living their lives in autonomy from God, those who have turned their backs upon God. How long, O Lord? Why don’t you turn your face upon them in terrible judgment? Why do you turn your back on us? Earlier we heard the psalmist’s cry, “How long will you hide your face from us?” (Ps 13:1).

God’s answer is both comforting and perplexing. White robes are given to them—there again is that little word *edothē*, “it was given.” These white robes indicate that though they are dead, they are vindicated in God’s sight. Then he tells them to rest a while, because a lot more saints have to be killed first. How do you make sense of that? If becoming a Christian is supposed to bring health, wealth and prosperity, why do all the saints in Revelation end up dead, killed for their faithful witness? As we sang earlier in William Cowper’s great hymn, “God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform.” The last verse runs, “Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his work in vain; God is his own interpreter and he will make it plain.” God’s purposes are hidden within the inscrutability of his own will. Attempting to discern these purposes without faith will be futile.

How do you make any sense out of the fact that all the saints in Revelation are killed? By seeing that death is not the final enemy. George Caird comments, “The idea that life on earth is so infinitely precious that the death which robs us of it must be the ultimate

tragedy is precisely the idolatry that John is trying here to combat.”¹ That’s a very sobering word for Americans, who devote enormous resources to avoiding or delaying death. This is a theme we’ll touch on again and again throughout the rest of Revelation. In Revelation there are two deaths. Christians may be killed for their witness, but this is merely the first death which ushers them into the first resurrection (20:5). “The second death has no power over them” (20:6). The second death is the lake of fire (20:14; 21:8), the place of eternal judgment whither are banished those who persist in turning their backs on God. It is the second death not the first death that is the ultimate tragedy.

The Day of the Lord

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?” (6:12-17)

The theme of judgment reaches a crescendo with the sixth seal. Again the language and imagery is drawn from the Old Testament, where descriptions of the sun being darkened and the moon turned blood red were not part of the weather forecast, but metaphors for the great and climactic day of the Lord. The imagery grows out of the tension between the way things are and the way things ought to be. In the world as it is, the wicked prosper, God’s people suffer under oppression, and God is not universally acclaimed. Where is God? Why does he allow this state of affairs to continue? Through his prophets, the Lord told his people that a day was coming when he would put things right. A day when he would judge his enemies, save his people, and vindicate his holy name. The day when this would happen is described as the “day of the Lord” or “the day of the Lord’s wrath,” or even just “that day.” “Great,” thought Israel, “the day is coming when God will zap our enemies.” But it is a dangerous thing to long for the day of the Lord. “Why do you long for the day of the Lord?” Amos asked Israel. “Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light” (Amos 5:18, 20). Because Israel had turned its back upon God, it would be a terrifying day when God turned his face upon her, for his face would be turned in judgment not salvation.

When does this day happen? When does God intervene to put things right? The prophetic imagery was fulfilled in 587 BC, when the Babylonians destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and took the people into captivity in Babylon. The day of the Lord arrived in 539 BC, when the Persians captured the invincible city of Babylon, and Cyrus issued a decree allowing the captive Jews to return home. It happened in greater measure in the first century AD when Jesus went to the cross. The Jews expected God to come to judge their enemies, the Romans, and vindicate them, establishing Israel as chief nation. But when God came, it was at the cross, on which, through his faithful and obedient servant Jesus he judged the greater enemies of sin, death and Satan, and through the shed blood of the slain Lamb brought salvation to his people. But we do not yet see all things put right. The day of the Lord is yet future. There is a day when God will

turn his face upon the earth to finally put things right. It's the day when the things which must happen happen. It's the day when it is proclaimed, "It is done!"

For those who have turned their backs on God, it is a terrifying thing to have his face turned upon them. They will try to hide from that face, for God's gaze is fixed on them in judgment. So terrifying is that judgment that they ask, "Who can stand?" Who can stand when God comes in judgment? The assumed answer is "no one," but that's not the correct answer. The next chapter is an interlude between the sixth and seventh seals. John has a vision into heaven where he sees that there are people who can stand before God: "there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (7:9).

Revelation paints a black and white picture. There are only two sets of people: those who have turned their back on God, and those who follow the Lamb. In the end, God will turn his face upon both sets. Sooner or later, everyone has to face God. For some that will be glorious, for others it will be terrifying. For those who have turned their backs upon God, it will be terrifying when he turns his face upon them. But for the saints, to see the face of God is their glorious destiny in the new heavens and the new earth (22:4). C. S. Lewis expresses this well,

In the end that face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.²

Do you long to see the face of God? Or are you too busy with your own life here on earth? Earlier we sang in F. W. Faber's lovely hymn, *My God how wonderful Thou art*,

How wonderful, how beautiful,
The sight of Thee must be.
...
Father of Jesus, love's Reward,
What Rapture it will be
Prostrate before Thy throne to lie,
And gaze, and gaze on Thee!

Sue and I have a border collie that can gaze and gaze on us. Does that prospect of gazing on God thrill you with anticipation, or bore you to a yawn, or make you quake in your boots? That is a far more important question than whether you have your charts filled in correctly.

**The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.**
(Num 6:24-26)

1. G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 113, commenting on Rev 8:11.

2. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 34.