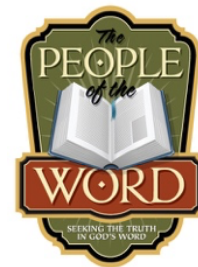


## The Six Seals

Revelation 6:1-17

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The word eschatology comes from the two Greek words *eschatos* and *logos*, meaning “last” and “word.” So eschatology is a word about last things—or, to put it another way, the study of things that will happen at the end.



Jesus warns us against being too prescriptive about the exact details. For example, when the disciples ask Him when He plans to restore the kingdom to His people, Jesus replies, *“It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority”* (Acts 1:7). And when Jesus talks to them about His second coming, He makes this remarkable statement: *“Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only”* (Matt. 24:36).

Scripture does however, tell us a great deal in the realm of eschatology.

In fact, when we talk about the last days, we’re not merely restricting ourselves to the study of things yet to happen. According to the Apostles, the last days began when Christ first entered the world.

For example, Hebrews chapter 1 verse 2 says that *“in these **last days**, God has spoken to us by his Son.”* The assumption is clear: we’re living in the last days right now and have been since the New Testament was written. That doesn’t mean that the Lord will return today, or in our lifetime, although He might. But it does mean that we are consciously to live our lives in the knowledge that the Lord’s return is not far off.

For those who ignore God or who presume on God’s forgiveness while living their “normal lives”, that is a warning much more fearful than anything we could imagine as we will see in Revelation chapter 6.

But for faithful followers, especially followers who are suffering or under persecution, it is an amazing thought to know that these days are the last days and that the Lord will return soon to gather His people into His arms. I will say more about His coming at the end our time together.

### The Book of Revelation

The worship of the emperor flourished in the province of Asia more than elsewhere in the empire; the result was that by the end of the first Christian century, the church in all its weaknesses was headed for a showdown with the state in all its power and glory.

By the Spirit, John sees that the martyrdom of Antipas (2:13) and John’s own exile (1:9) are but a small foretaste of the great havoc that the state will wreak on the church before it is all over (1:9; 2:10; 3:10; 6:9–11; 7:14; 12:11, 17).

As a prophet, John also sees this conflict in the larger context of the holy war—the ultimate cosmic conflict between God (and his Christ) and Satan (see 12:1–9)—in which God wins eternal salvation for his people. The people’s present role is to *“triumph over Satan (the Devil, our adversary and accuser) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of our testimony,...not loving our lives so much as to shrink*

*from death*" (12:11). As God has already defeated the dragon through the death and resurrection of Christ (the Messiah is caught up to heaven, 12:5), so he will judge the state for her crimes against his people.

The Revelation plays out these themes in a variety of ways. The earlier parts (chs. 1–6) set the stage for the unfolding drama, starting with a vision of the Risen Christ, who holds the keys to everything that follows (1:12–20), while letters to selective churches represent their varied strengths and weaknesses (chs. 2–3). These are followed by a vision of the Reigning Creator God and the Redeeming Lamb (chs. 4–5), to whom alone belong all wisdom, glory, and power and before whom all heaven and earth will bow. As John weeps because no one can be found to break the seals of the scroll (which is full of God's justice and righteous judgments), he is told that the "*Lion of the tribe of Judah*" (5:5; see Gen 49:9–10), the "Root of David" (Isa 11:1–2, 10), has "triumphed," but the only lion John sees is God's slain Lamb (echoing the Exodus Passover and Isa 53:7), who has redeemed people from all the nations.

Such a Conqueror sets the drama in motion by breaking the seals (Rev 6), which offer a kind of "overture" (striking all the themes) for what follows (conquest, war, famine, death (first 4 seals) — followed by martyrdom (seal 5), to which God responds with judgment (seal 6). It is especially important to note that, apart from his role in the final battle (19:11–21), the only way Christ appears from here on in the narrative is as the slain Lamb; this is how his followers are expected to triumph as well (12:11).

Let's take a deeper dive into the detail on chapter 6.

### **The First Four Seals – Rev. 6:1-8**

Although part of the preceding vision, the account of the seven seals also begins a series of three visions (seals, trumpets, bowls), all of which have the same structure—a series of four, a series of two, an interlude of two visions, and a seventh.

In this first vision, the four horsemen (adapted from Zech. 1; 6) represent **conquest, war, famine, and death** (= the empire against God's people).

When Jesus Christ took the scroll and opened the first four seals, we encounter the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. There is a remarkable correspondence with what Jesus taught in the "mini apocalypse" of Matthew 24 when the apostles asked, "And what is the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?" Remember John is the only Gospel that did not include the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24; Luke 21; Mark 13).

**The First Seal - The White Horse** (Rv 6:2): The rider upon the horse is sent forth to conquer.

According to many premillennialists the white horse and its rider represent Anti-Christ riding forth to conquer the world. The crown given to him in verse 2 is not a symbol of legitimate sovereignty but a crown acquired by conquest. Who gives the Antichrist these victories and this power? It is the dragon Satan (cf. Rev. 13:2 and 2 Thess. 2:8-10).

According to Walvoord, "The rider on the white horse is none other than the "prince that shall come" of Daniel 9:26, who is to head up the revived Roman Empire and ultimately become the world

ruler...He is Satan's masterpiece and the counterfeit of all that Christ is or claims to be...the world ruler of the tribulation, same individual described as the beast out of the sea in Revelation 13."

Contrast that interpretation with the amillennial view. According to Biederwolf, "Almost all scholars down to A.D. 150 took the image as a symbol of the preached gospel and its success." Hendriksen writes: "Our Lord is riding forth victoriously, conquering and to conquer. That, in all probability, is the meaning of the rider on the white horse."

Hendriksen continues, "This interpretation is demanded by the parallel passage in the book of Revelation itself. In Revelation 19:11 we have another instance of a rider upon a white horse. In that passage we are definitely told that rider is the Christ, the Word of God, Faithful and True...In Revelation 5:5 we read that Christ 'has conquered'. This refers to the accomplished redemption on the cross of Calvary. In 6:2 the rider on the white horse is introduced as 'conquering and to conquer'. That conquest is being carried on at present. In 19:13 the rider upon the white horse is described as clothed with a garment 'sprinkled with blood', that is, the blood of His enemies. Thus, He is going to conquer in the great day of judgment...Why not permit the Apocalypse to explain its own symbolism?"

How should we respond to the discrepancy? One is the Anti-Christ, the other Jesus Himself. Let's respond with grace.

The late Chuck Missler once quipped, "For you brothers and sisters that believe we will pass through The Tribulation and the millennial reign, don't worry, when The Rapture takes place, we will explain it to you on the way up."

**The Second Seal - The Fiery Red Horse** (Rev. 6:4): According to Jesus, following a time of peace there will be worldwide war (Mt 24:6-7a). The "fiery red" color symbolizes slaughter (2 Kings 3:22-23). Therefore, he is given the "large sword" because the number of those he kills is so great (cf. 13:10, 14). John might have thought of Nero's slaughter of Christians, the martyrdom of Antipas (2:13), or perhaps those slain under Domitian's persecutions (cf. Mt 10:34; 24:9). The second horse naturally follows the first; that is, where Christ's message of amazing grace is preached and embraced, the sword of persecution follows.

**The Third Seal - The Black Horse** (Rev. 6:5-6): According to Jesus, a time of war will result in famine (Mt 24:7b). "A quart of wheat...and three quarts of barley for a day's wage." A quart of wheat would supply an average person one day's sustenance. Barley was used by the poor to mix with the wheat. A certain class of people are going to be hard-pressed. Jesus followers who are unwilling to accept the mark of the beast (Rev. 13:17), who refuse to compromise their convictions for the sake of economic or other personal gain, will suffer.

**The Fourth Seal - The Pale Horse** (Rev. 6:8): According to Jesus, there will be earthquakes that cause many deaths (Mt 24:7c).

Ezek 14:21, "For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: How much worse will it be when I send against Jerusalem my four dreadful judgments—sword and famine and wild beasts and plague—to kill its men and their animals!"

According to Ezekiel, the reason the Lord sent these judgments is that...(14:11) *"...the people of Israel will no longer stray from me, nor will they defile themselves anymore with all their sins. They will be my people, and I will be their God, declares the Sovereign LORD."*

The Psalmist proclaimed; *I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth – 121:1-2*

### **The Fifth and Sixth Seals – Rev. 6:9-17**

The series of two (fifth and sixth seals) prepares the way for the rest of the message in John's revelation by asking the two key questions:

(1) The martyrs cry out, "**How long**, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (vs. 10). They are told it will get worse before it gets better, and...

(2) those receiving God's judgment cry out in 6:15-17, *"Then the **kings** of the earth, the **princes**, the **generals**, the **rich**, the **mighty**, and **everyone** else, both **slave** and **free**, 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 withstand it?"*

These words echo Malachi's proclamation (3:2), *"**Who** can endure the day of his coming? **Who** can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap."*

The immediate reply to this last question (*who can withstand it?*) is the interlude between the sixth and seventh seals. Answer - The ones who can stand are those who are "**sealed**" by God (Rev 7:1-8) and the multitudes who have come out of the great suffering—the redeemed of the Lord (7:9-17). We'll look at that next week.

### **How and when are followers of Jesus "sealed" by God?**

*In him (Christ) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding...In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory – Ephesians 1:7-8, 11-14.*

The opening of **the seventh seal** then marks the unveiling of the seven angels with trumpets (Rev 8:1-5). The silence is for effect; note that the judgments about to be revealed are in direct response to the prayers of the saints (6:10), *"How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"*

### **Reflection and Response**

Since these coming judgments are certainly more than symbolic descriptions, how should Jesus' words in John 14:1-3, comfort all who have put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as "*the way, the truth, and the life?*" (Jn 14:6) "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*"

2 Cor. 4:17, *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*

Let's be careful that our expectations of God in this life accurately reflect the promises He has made to us. We often become disillusioned based on expectations of His performance that He never committed to. He promised that even though we walk through the shadow of death, that we can fear no evil. Why? Because He is with us (Ps. 23:4). He never promised that we would escape the walk, however that walk may look for each of us.

## **CONCLUSION**

Sometimes, especially as we get older, we can start to believe that our best days are behind us. But as Followers of Jesus, that's not true is it? Our best days are ahead of us. And they're getting closer by the second.

That's because Jesus is coming again. It is what John has been communicating throughout the book of Revelation.

It's the moment at the end of history, promised by Jesus Himself, when He will return to save His people and to judge the living and the dead.

*"An hour is coming,"* says Jesus in John's Gospel chapter 5:25, *"when all who are in the tombs will hear the Son of God's voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment."*

What will the second coming be like?

Well, at the end of Luke's account of Jesus' ascension in Acts chapter 1:11, we read:

*"This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."*

So when the Lord does return, it will be public and very visible. Jesus Himself says, *"As the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man"* – Matt. 24:27. There will be no mistaking it.

Again, in Matthew chapter 24:30, Jesus says that *"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."*

And in the first chapter of Revelation (1:7), we're told, *"Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him."*

Why is it that some wail and mourn at the second coming? Because it will be clear that this time, Christ is not coming to hold out the offer of salvation, as He did previously. Instead, at the second coming, He will save those who love and trust Him and condemn those who have ignored or rejected Him.

Right from the very first moments of the early church, right up to February 10, 2022 the church has given fair warning—just as Jesus and the Apostles did: God *"**commands** all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead"* (Acts 17:30-31).

By the way, as followers, we don't make the mistake of thinking that because we're confident of how the second coming will go for us, the way we live our life now doesn't matter. In the final chapter of the Bible, Jesus says, *"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done"* (Rev. 22:12).

That means that the way we live as a Follower of Jesus matters very much. The way we live now will be reflected in the extent to which Christ rewards us when He returns. Matthew 25:21 Jesus states, *"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"* and in Luke 19, Jesus gives it a slightly different twist, *"'Well done, my good servant!' his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of **ten** cities.'* *"The second came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned five more.'* *"His master answered, 'You take charge of **five** cities."*

So what does the Bible tell us about when this second coming will occur?

Jesus Himself tells us that (Matthew 24:36) *"no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only."* As a result, Jesus tells us (Matthew 24:44), *"Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."*

But then, in practically the last words recorded in Scripture, Jesus says to His people, *"Surely I am coming soon"* (Rev. 22:20).

Now, we may say. It's been nearly two thousand years since those words were recorded. It's not "soon" in the sense we usually understand that word, is it?

Second Peter chapter 3 and verse 8 addresses that very point: *"With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."*

But in another sense, Jesus' coming is "soon." Because even if the date of His second coming proves to be another thousand years from now, Christ will come for us much sooner than that, will He not?

Our lives are over in a blink. Before you know it, you're fifty, and the day of your death is almost certainly closer to you than the day of your birth. But for those who are in Christ, that moment will be such a sweet and glorious one—even if we have to pass through suffering to get there.

So, let me say, Your best days are ahead of you. And getting closer by the second.

I'll conclude with these words from the Apostle Paul, *I thank God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus* - Philippians 1:3-6.