

Notes on Revelation 6

Intro: If we are correct in concluding that the "book" of chapter five represents the "things that must shortly come to pass", then we must see the opening of the individual seals in chapter six as a progressive revelation of those things. The first five seals are a prelude to the day of God's wrath; they depict the kind of events that precede God's judgment. The sixth seal is an introduction to the day of God's wrath as having come. The seventh seal consists of the manifestations of God's wrath upon men. Essentially then what is revealed in the opening of the seals is the prelude to and the consummation of the judgments of God against his enemies that brings about their total defeat and the complete establishment of the kingdom of God in the world.

I. Interpreting the seals (The visions of Zechariah)

A. There is a remarkable parallel between John's vision and the night visions of Zechariah. Perhaps an understanding of the symbolism in the latter will assist us in reaching some decisions concerning the former.

B. The First Vision (1:7-17)

1. The Symbolism--Riders of horses (red, dappled or sorrel, and white) report that the earth is peaceful and quiet. The angel asks, "How long will you have no compassion for Jerusalem...?" (v. 12) God answers, "I will return with Jerusalem with compassion" (v. 16). Immediately this is followed by a second vision in which the horns which scattered Judah are "thrown down" (v. 18-21), and then a third vision where God calls his scattered people out of Babylon and Jerusalem is established in peace and security (2:1-13).

2. The Message is Messianic--A follow-up on Haggai's message of the shaking of the nations. Though all is quiet now among the nations, God is not unaware of how the nations that he used to punish Israel have only become more wicked. God is also aware of his downcast people. He will call his people out of Babylon and back to Jerusalem where he will guard and protect them. Jerusalem (Zion) will be redeemed and her enemies destroyed. This was not fulfilled in the O.T. period literally. It is fulfilled in the Messianic kingdom. Keil points out that the horses are sent out in chapter one as the appointed instruments of God's judgment and in order to overthrow the nations of the world that are living in rest and security and to perfect His own city, Zion or Jerusalem. "The promise embraces the whole of the future of the kingdom of God".

C. The Seventh vision (6:1-8)

1. Note also the vision of chapter 6:1-8. Four chariots go out pulled by various colors of horses (red, black, white, dappled). Cf. colors in Revelation. They are said to be "the four spirits of heaven, going forth after standing before the Lord of all the earth". They go out and patrol the earth. The angel reports that "they have caused My spirit to rest ("appeased my wrath", NASV) in the land of the north".

2. The horses in particular symbolize the winds of judgment that come from God's throne. Keil again gives this insightful comment: "The vision does not set forth (merely, jdf) the destruction of the world-power, which is at enmity against God, but simply the judgment by which God purifies the sinful world, exterminates all that is ungodly, and renews it by His Spirit.

D. The horses of Zechariah then symbolize the agencies of God's providence, the manifestations of judgment that are designed by God to punish evil nations and bring them to penitence lest they face total destruction.

II. Interpreting the seals (Preludes to judgment)

A. Since we know that the sixth and seventh seals have to do with the introduction of the day of wrath and the execution of God's judgments against his enemies, it seems likely that the first five seals are devoted to the preludes to the day of the Lord. We are looking for insight into what events prepare the way for or signal the approaching the day of the Lord.

B. Jesus in Mt. 24:3-14 revealed some of the "birth pangs" that would lead to the day of the Lord bringing judgment to God's enemies and salvation to His people. What are those preludes to judgment?

1. Wars and rumors of wars (nation against nation, kingdom against kingdom, wars and rumors of wars; all of these signal the advance of wickedness in the world that leads to judgment)

2. Moral degradation (increase in lawlessness and its violent expressions)

Violence

Injustice

2. Natural catastrophes (Famines, plagues, and earthquakes). These are providential calls to repentance in nature itself.

3. Persecution of God's people (God's people delivered up to tribulation, killed, hated by all nations for Christ's sake, attending this would be apostacy caused by increasing lawlessness, false prophets and Messiahs)

III. Interpreting the seals (What do they symbolize?)

- A. Comparing John's vision with Zechariah's.
1. Note the interesting parallels to Zechariah's vision. In John's vision four horses go out but they do not return to report that the world is peaceful and quiet but rather to disturb the peace and tranquility of the earth. The overthrow of the heathen nations is already beginning. The preludes to judgment are already occurring. Then saints under the altar cry out, "How long?" like the angel in Zechariah's vision. Interestingly, the sixth seal suggests that the day of wrath has come, just as God has said to Zechariah, "I am angry with the nations who are at ease" (1:15).
 2. Is it possible that the six seals of Revelation are presenting the fulfillment of the same message as that of Zechariah? God is calling his scattered people out of spiritual Babylon and gathering them to himself in his spiritual Jerusalem. He is to war against his spiritual enemies until all are defeated resulting in "the new Jerusalem" where God dwells among his people forever.
- B. Comparing John's vision to Jesus' Olivet (eschatological) discourse.
1. A cursory look at the seals reveals a remarkable similarity to Jesus' remarks. There are references to lawless bloodshed, conquest, famine, death of various kinds.
 2. Is John presenting the preludes to a day of the Lord as Jesus described them? Let's see: The living creatures symbolizing the powers of God command the horses to go forth: "Come!" This is accompanied by thunder, a symbol of God's power and wrath.
- C. The first seal--v. 1-2
1. There are two principle features in each seal: color of horse and action of the rider. The horse is white, the action is conquest from without.
 2. A white horse--indicates heavenly glory and purity or it may simply reveal majesty and festivity associated with victory. Another possibility is that his cause is righteous. He fights against evil men.
 3. Bow is an agent of conquest. The crown is one of victory. This rider conquers his enemies; he subjugates them to himself.
 4. Are we to interpret this metaphorically or literally? One way God conquers his enemies is by conversion. Thus many see this as a picture of victorious evangelism. Thus, many commentators see the rider of the horse as Christ and the symbol his conquest of sinners. Others see it as a picture of Christ in military conquest, using earthly nations to destroy others. Others see this symbol as conveying the idea of conquest in a more literal sense. This seems to be more consistent with the other interpretations in how the language is taken. Also this is more consistent with the idea of thunder as a symbol of wrath. This horse then may symbolize God's use

of military conquest or subjugation as a means of breaking the power of nations. Jesus taught that such was a prelude to the day of the Lord.

D. The second seal--v. 3-4

1. The color is red; the action is conflict (the loss of peace on earth).
2. Red is the symbol of bloodshed.
3. This is a picture of lawlessness or violence within a nation. I found no conclusive evidence that the word "sword" implies a sacrificial offering, though it is often used in that context because it is the butcher's knife. The word "slay" conveys the idea of wanton "slaughter" as one would an animal. But it does not imply that the victim is innocent (Cf. Rev. 13:3). Note that they "slay" one another? Do Christians do this?
4. This symbol seems to be another example of God's wrath being manifest toward wicked nations by means of their own internal violence. He uses their own violence to destroy it. Such increase in lawlessness is a prelude to the day of the Lord.

E. The third seal--v. 5-6

1. The color is black; the action is the carrying of scales. The voice from the living creatures tell us that the price is unjust--a quart of wheat for a denarius. This is about enough food for one person for a day's wages. Barley, an inferior grain, is cheaper but also expensive. Perhaps barely enough for a small family. Oil and wine not affected. These are luxury items that only the rich can afford. This indicates that the cause of the shortage is not drought but injustice and discrimination.
2. Thus, this seal stands for the injustice by which a nation is destroyed or brought to its knees.

F. The fourth seal--v. 7-8

1. The color is ashen; the action is death.
2. This passage borrows the language of passages like Ezekial 14:21 (sword, famine, wild beasts, plague) or Jer. 24:10 (sword, famine, pestilence). These forms of death were commonly mentioned in the prophets as signs of God's wrath upon a people. These represent the various ways that a people may be destroyed by death in general--whether by sword, disease, famine, or wild beasts.
3. But why are these things coming? For what reason are they being given?

G. The fifth seal--v. 9-11 (The pleas for vengeance.)

1. Here is a picture of martyred souls. Under the altar as if they were sacrificial victims. They seem to be Christians since they are slain "because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained" (cf. 1:2,9, 12:11). Ogden contends that they are O.T. saints.
2. They call for vengeance on those who slew them. We are not yet told who their persecutors are but that they are

crying for vengeance. They are told that more are to be killed as they. Their white robes signify God's acknowledgment of their purity. They were innocent of wrong-doing. Cf. 1 Pet. 4:15-16.

3. It is fitting that the souls are presented here; for as a nation deteriorates in morality, God's people often suffering at the hands of those that do evil.

3. This seal reveals another prelude to judgment--the persecution of the righteous.

H. The sixth seal--v. 12-16 (The introduction of the day of the wrath of God and the Lamb)

1. It is described in apocalyptic language: the destruction of the world itself. v. 12-14 This is not the end of the whole world but the end of the world for the persecutors.

2. The persecutors themselves acknowledge the fierceness of the wrath of God. Cf. Lk. 23:30

Conclusion: The message of this chapter centers around the contents of the book. What God is telling his people is that the day of wrath for the wicked is soon coming. Already the agencies of His providence that bring destruction are at work. They are the product of the nations own weakness and sin: subjugation by foreign powers, violence within, injustice to the poor, natural calamities. While these things work to the destruction of a nation, they also create the environment in which God's people are persecuted and killed. But the day of the Lord is near, says John. And when that day arrives it will instill terror and dread in the heart of every wicked man. Thus, Jesus introduces the judgment of God against those who have persecuted his people. Those judgments are about to be poured out upon them.