

Revelation 6: Apocalypse...How? (Judgment Begins)

Intro

(NOTE: The introductory comments have been deleted from this transcript because they relied heavily on accompanying PowerPoint slides.)

A Pivotal Chapter

Chapter 6 of Revelation is perhaps the pivotal chapter in the whole book. In the previous five chapters — through the letters to the seven churches in chapt. 1-3, through the glorious scene of God on his throne in chapt. 4, and through the amazing description of worship in heaven in chapt. 5 — John's readers have received a full and awesome picture of the power, glory, majesty, and ultimate triumph of Christ.

It was extremely important for John's audience, the church, to be assured of Christ's victory because they were feeling anything but victorious at the time Revelation was written. The church was undergoing severe persecution by Rome, with many Christians being martyred for their faith. The first five chapters of Revelation showed them that all their suffering would be worth it.

It was also important for the first five chapters to encourage and assure the church because starting in chapter 6, what John had to report wouldn't sound so cheerful. With chapt. 6, John begins a description of God's judgment on the earth.

It's as if John is saying to the church, "Hold on tight to all that encouragement I just gave you, because I don't want you to lose hope as I begin to relate all the horrible stuff that comes next!"

God's judgment would begin with the opening of the seven seals, followed by seven trumpets, which are followed by seven bowls of God's wrath. As Craig has told us before, the number seven in the Bible means "completion." Through this series of seven's, God was making it unmistakable that his judgment would be complete. As Christ opens each seal, a different form of judgment is announced.

Jesus Is Worthy to Judge the World

When Craig preached on chapt. 5, he focused on how Jesus is worthy of our worship and praise. Jesus was the only one in heaven and earth found worthy to open the seven seals. He is worthy because he was slain for us, because by his blood he ransomed us, and because he triumphed over Satan, sin, and death.

It follows that if Jesus is the only one worthy to open the seals, then he is the also the only one worthy to judge the earth.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus understood that the Father had given him the right to judge the righteous and the wicked in the last days:

²²“Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son...”

²⁷“And he (God the Father) has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.”

²⁸“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. ³⁰By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.” (Jn. 5:22, 27-30)

Significantly, these words of Jesus were recorded in the gospel of John, the same apostle to whom the future fulfillment of that judgment was revealed.

But John was not the only apostle who understood this aspect of Jesus’ ministry.

Paul, in preaching the gospel to the Athenians, said that God the Father,

“... has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed (i.e., Jesus). He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.” (Ac. 17:31)

Clearly, the Father and Son had predetermined that Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, would be the one to judge the world before his return.

Judgment and Justice

Throughout chapt. 6 we will see the various means that Jesus uses to judge the world. His judgments may seem harsh, but let’s remember that God has long been patient with mankind, waiting on as many as possible to come to a saving knowledge of Christ.

As Paul wrote to Timothy...

⁹ “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. ¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.” (II Pet. 3:9-10)

God has been incredibly patient with rebellious mankind because he wants as many people as possible to repent and come to Christ. But there will come a day when his patience will end and he will bring about the righteous judgment that he has promised.

Many people, perhaps even some of us, have a problem with the notion of God judging people, in the sense of his punishing them and sending them to hell. We basically don’t like the whole idea of judgment.

Yet, almost everyone likes the idea of justice. Why is it that we don't like the idea of "judgment" but we do like the idea of "justice"? I think it's because we have a narrow, negative understanding of what "judgment" is.

Allow me to illustrate. This is how many of us picture "justice":

(SLIDE of "Lady Justice")

"Justice" provokes thoughts of something that is unbiased, righteous, reasonable, and beneficial to a healthy society.

On the other hand, this is how many of us may picture "judgment":

(SLIDE of Simon Cowell frowning, with thumb pointing down)

I confess I have never watched "American Idol," but Simon Cowell's reputation as a highly opinionated, mean-spirited judge precedes him!

As opposed to "justice," "judgment" provokes thoughts of something (or someone) that is stern, self-righteous, perhaps partial, and lacking compassion.

If that is the prevailing understanding we have of "judgment," then we only understand it in a negative sense. And we need to understand that there is a positive sense to "judgment" as well.

"Judgment" in a positive sense, whether exercised by a human judge or by God, has the same qualities as "justice" — it is unbiased, righteous, reasonable, and beneficial to a healthy society.

The problem, for many people, is that we don't understand that there can be no justice without judgment.

Where God is concerned, judgment is simply the execution of God's justice.

Whenever God dispenses his justice, he must necessarily make a judgment and carry out that judgment.

"Son of Sam" illustration:

Thirty years ago this summer, I moved to New York. I will never forget the date because it was also thirty years ago this summer that the "Son of Sam" terrorized New York City. Do any of you remember that? The "Son of Sam" was David Berkowitz, a serial killer who murdered six people and wounded seven others. He is perhaps the most notorious serial killer ever to roam New York City. He was captured on Aug. 10, 1977, bringing an end to what was then the largest manhunt in the city's history.

Now imagine you are present at Berkowitz's trial after he is convicted and as the judge is about to announce his sentence. What would you think of the judge if he had let Berkowitz off with a warning? Or what would you think if the judge, at most, had only sentenced him to 10 years in prison?

Would you consider that judge to be just? Would you think that justice had been served with such a lenient sentence?

Of course not! We'd all think that judge was out of his mind!

In reality, Berkowitz was sentenced to life in prison and justice was served.

The point is, we seem to have no problem with human judges executing judgment over convicted criminals. In fact, we applaud them for doing so and would be upset if they didn't execute such judgments. We seem to intuitively grasp that for justice to be carried out, a judgment must first be made.

So why do so many people feel quite differently about God executing his judgment? Why do so many expect God to let bygones be bygones, and expect him to leave unpunished those who have transgressed against him?

Regardless of what our society or misinformed church-goers may think, the Biblical God is a God who executes his judgment in order to be just.

As we continue through chapt. 6 and the following chapters of Revelation that describe God's judgment of the world, let's remember that he is at all times being perfectly just.

Perhaps then, we will no longer have such a negative view of his judgments.

Seals 1-4: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

READ Rev. 6:1-8

¹*"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!"* ²*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.*

³*When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!"* ⁴*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.*

⁵*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.* ⁶*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!"*

⁷*When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!"* ⁸*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."*

As each of the first four seals is opened by the Lamb, a different one of the four living creatures says, "Come!" Remember, the four living creatures are also known as cherubim, powerful angelic beings that surround the throne of God.

Each living creature calls forth a different horse and rider. These four horsemen are famous in art and literature and are commonly known as “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” although they are never called that in the Bible itself.

(SLIDE of Albrecht Dürer engraving of them)

They are called that because the book of Revelation is sometimes referred to as the “Apocalypse of John” (“apocalypse” being another word for “revelation”). They may also be called that because in common parlance “apocalypse” means the “end of the world,” which these riders seemed to be ushering in.

Who Are the Horsemen?

What do each of these four horsemen represent?

Taken one by one, they appear to represent Conquest, War, Famine, and Death, respectively.

Conquest:

Verse 2 describes a horseman bent on conquest, either political and/or military.

War:

Vv. 3-4 describe a horseman with a sword and the power to take peace from the earth while he makes men kill each other. That seems to be a clear description of war.

Famine:

Vv. 5-6 describe a horseman bringing famine. The expression “*A quart of wheat for a day’s wages, and three quarts of barley for a day’s wages*” indicates how scarce food will be in the famine. Scales were used in the marketplace to weigh out the amount of grain purchased. The cost indicated here was eight times the normal price for wheat and five times the normal price for barley.

Death:

Vv. 7-8 describe the only horseman who is specifically named, that is, “Death.” The mention of killing by sword, famine, plague, and wild beasts would be familiar to John’s readers. Those four means of death were often cited in the OT as God’s instruments of judgment on rebellious Israel (Deut. 32:24; Ezek. 5:17; 14:21).

There seems to be a logical sequence involved in the order of release of the four horsemen:

The pursuit of conquest would lead to warfare. One result of warfare would be scarcity of food, leading to famine. The end result of war and famine would be widespread death.

Of the four horsemen, only the first one has generated much debate in terms of identifying him with a specific individual. Though many theories have been put forth, the two most common are that the first horseman is either the antichrist or Christ himself. Personally, I don’t find the arguments for either to be very convincing.

For my money, rather than speculate on individual identities, I think it makes more sense within the context of Revelation to see all four horsemen as angels of judgment. That is consistent with the role of angels in the following chapters. For example, other angels bring judgment by sounding the seven trumpets and still others by pouring out the seven bowls of God’s wrath.

Timing of the Horsemen

There is also debate on when these four disasters occur in time. There are at least three possibilities:

1. In the first-century, or
2. Ongoing, or
3. In the future

Firstly, since John's readers were certainly acquainted with political and military oppression, with war, with famine, and with death— perhaps these judgments can be seen as current events for John's audience.

or...

Secondly, since all of these disasters have occurred at different times throughout human history, perhaps these are God's ongoing judgments on the sinfulness and rebellion of man.

or...

Thirdly, since the events resulting from the opening of the seven seals, followed by the seven trumpets, followed by the seven bowls, all seem to climax with Christ's return and his defeat of the beast in Rev. 19 — and since that hasn't happened, yet — this would seem to suggest that the events in chapt. 6 are yet future. That is assuming that the entire vision of Revelation that John was granted occurs in what we would consider chronological order.

My best guess is that the conquest, war, famine, and death recorded in Rev. 6 can refer to such events both in the first century and ongoing throughout history. But I think there yet will be future occurrences of these disasters on an enormous scale preceding Christ's return.

That's just my opinion. Don't bet your life savings on it!

Seal 5: The Martyrs

READ Rev. 6:9-11

⁹“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. ¹⁰They 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?” ¹¹Then 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.”

The opening of the fifth seal reveals the presence of Christian martyrs, those who were killed because of their faith in Jesus. They cry out to God for their deaths to be avenged, for justice. It is important to note that theirs is not a personal desire for revenge but a concern for the reputation of God. In other words, they are asking God to validate their faith in Christ by condemning the unbelievers who had murdered them.

The martyrs' position "under the altar" doesn't mean they are hiding there or under it for shelter. This is probably a reference to the fact that, in the temple, the priests poured out the blood (i.e., the "life") of their sacrifices at the base of the altar of burnt offering. Likewise, the martyrs had poured out their lives as an offering and sacrifice to God.

The white robes they are given to wear symbolize their purity, now that they have been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 22:14), having shared in Christ's sacrificial suffering.

We will look more in depth at the martyrs when we investigate Rev. 7 next week.

Seal 6: The Great Earthquake

READ Rev. 6:12-17

¹²"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, ¹³and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. ¹⁴The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

¹⁵Then 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. ¹⁶They 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! ¹⁷For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

The opening of the sixth seal unleashes a powerful earthquake and disturbances in the heavens.

The events described in these verses are God's response to the martyrs' question in v. 10, "*How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?*"

Without specifying a timetable, God conveys with certainty that their deaths will be vindicated by his coming judgment.

The way John describes the earthquake is relatively clear, but the language he uses to describe the events in the sky is somewhat obscure.

The sun turning black and the moon turning blood red sounds like an eclipse. The sky receding "like a scroll" could be a huge storm. These are just speculations. But what does John mean when he says "the stars in the sky fell to earth"? Good question!

We don't know precisely what any of these cosmic disturbances are but they must have been awesome and frightening.

We do know that such colorful language was common to Biblical apocalyptic prophecies.

For example, in a passage that Peter quoted on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:20), the prophet Joel says, "*The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.*" (Joel 2:31)

Regarding God's judgment of the nations, Isaiah wrote, *"All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree."* (Isa. 34:4)

Notice how similar the language that Joel and Isaiah use is to the language that John uses in Revelation. That's not coincidence. John's audience would have been familiar with such OT passages and would have understood that John's vision was describing the day of God's final judgment of the earth, as foretold in the OT.

In vv. 15-17 we see that these events literally put the "fear of God" in unbelievers from all walks of life. They would rather have a mountain fall on them and kill them than face the righteous wrath of the Lamb!

Finally, in the midst of God's devastating judgment, the rebellious unbelievers ask, *"...who can stand?"*

For the answer to that question, come back next week!

Application: Do Not Judge Others!

If the theme of Rev. 6 is judgment, what can we take away from that and apply to our own lives? To answer that, I believe we have to look elsewhere in scripture.

While it is the right of God to judge whom he pleases, the NT is clear that we are not to judge one another.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has some strong words to say to us about judging others:

¹"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ²For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

³"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (Matt. 7:1-5)

In a similar manner, Jesus says in the gospel of Luke:

³⁷"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." (Lk. 6:37)

The apostle James states in no uncertain terms:

"There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you — who are you to judge your neighbor?" (Jas. 4:12)

Clearly, it is not for us to judge one another.

Judgment is a prerogative reserved for God alone.

Having said that, of course there are times when we have to “judge” in the sense of evaluating or assessing others.

For example:

- A Christian supervisor has to be able to judge his employees’ performance.
- A pastor or other church leader sometimes has to judge between two church members when they are having a dispute.
- There are times when all of us may have to confront a friend about an attitude or act that we have judged is not right.
- Etc., etc.

When the Bible says we are not to “judge” one another, what it means is that we are not to judge in the sense of “condemning” one another.

To “condemn” someone else means to look down on their character, convictions, faults, or personality from a place of perceived moral superiority.

The bottom line is that we need to learn the distinction between condemning someone’s person and evaluating their attitudes and actions. We may evaluate but we are never to condemn.

Tips to Avoid Judging Others

Even if we understand the difference between condemning someone and making an evaluation, all of us still have the tendency to judge others in the wrong sense of the word.

If judging others wasn’t such a strong impulse, the Bible wouldn’t warn us against it so often and so strongly. Judging others is one of those wonderful, sinful proclivities that clings to us like a tenacious barnacle even after we’re saved!

So how can we avoid judging others? Let me conclude today by suggesting a few practical tips to help us improve our score in this area.

1. Don’t label others:

- “You’re so lazy!”
- “What an idiot!”
- “He’s a loser.”
- “She’s such a flirt.”

Such labels have a way of negatively altering someone’s perception of themselves or others’ perception of the person so labeled.

Example:

Once, another pastor told me that a well-known worship leader and songwriter was a “flake.” From that point forward, my view of that worship leader was negatively colored. Whenever I heard his songs, I found myself looking for evidence of his being a flake in his lyrics or in how he performed. Although I didn’t know him personally, I was guilty of judging him based on a label I had heard applied to him.

2. Don't make negative pronouncements:

- "You'll never make it!"
- "You can't do that!"
- "You just don't have what it takes."
- "You'll never amount to anything."

Such pronouncements are almost like curses. Many are the stories of individuals who have heard such things said about them and were burdened by such judgments for the rest of their lives.

If we could miraculously eradicate the effects of negative labels and pronouncements from the people they have been applied to, we could probably empty almost every therapist office in the country!

3. Don't gossip.

It's easier to judge someone behind their back than to their face, so gossip presents a perfect vehicle for judging others. Don't tell others your negative opinions about somebody else.

Example:

Recently, a young friend of the family was visiting us. At the time, I was upset with some mutual friends who had failed to keep a commitment to attend an event. The date for the event was based on when these friends said they could make it and several other people set their calendars accordingly. I was angry about these people being unreliable and so inconsiderate of the others who did attend. I was angry because these people did not apologize. I was angry because they have a habit of either not making commitments or breaking those commitments. This was not an isolated incident.

Out of my anger, I began to lambaste these people in front of our young friend. I complained about these people being unreliable, rude, and incapable of keeping their commitments. Basically, I was judging them by doing two of the things I am suggesting we should not do: I was labeling them and gossiping about them! (Bad pastor!)

P.S. I later felt convicted of my bad behavior, especially since I ranted in front of our young friend. He was put in an awkward position and could have had his own view of these mutual friends poisoned by what I said. That same day, I called him to apologize and ask his forgiveness.

4. Praise others rather than criticize them.

We tend to be quick to criticize and slow to praise others, whereas we should be quick to praise and slow to criticize. Dwell on others' strengths rather than their weaknesses. Tell them what you appreciate about them. Encourage them at every opportunity.

5. Consider your own shortcomings before judging someone else for theirs.

This is where we practice Jesus' exhortation to pull the redwood tree from our own eye before we offer to remove the speck from our brother's eye.

6. Practice the “Golden Rule.”

Even if we can't remember the previous five guidelines as we interact with people, we'll still be much less judgmental if we only remember to practice one guideline — the “Golden Rule.” “...*do to others what you would have them do to you.*” (Matt. 7:12)
Before you judge someone else, consider how you would like it if they judged you.

Consciously practicing these six guidelines should go a long way toward helping us avoid judging others.