

## **“The Tragic History of the World”**

**Revelation 6:1-17**

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**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

John has reported so far that in his vision of things in heaven he had seen a throne with a figure of great majesty sitting upon it, a scroll sealed with seven seals, and a Lamb who appeared to have been slain. He saw the figure on the throne hand the scroll to the Lamb. We read in chapter 5 that the Lamb alone was worthy to open the scroll and now, in chapter 6, he will begin to do so. Six of the seven seals will be broken in chapter 6, the seventh not until the beginning of chapter 8.

This chapter begins the central section of the book of Revelation, chapters 6-16, which are organized around three sets of seven: the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls, with three interludes placed between. The relationship between the three sets of seven is much discussed but some things are clear. There is a progressive intensification as we proceed: the seals affect a quarter of the earth, the trumpets a third, and the bowls the whole earth. Each cycle recapitulates and develops what has gone before, that is, in general they cover the same ground and describe the same history leading up to the consummation at the Second Coming of Christ. Someone has well described this central section of Revelation, that beginning in chapter 6, as a musical variation. In a variation a musical theme is repeated again and again but each time with changes. The theme is developed in different ways. The listener can always recognize the theme, he can hear it in, under, around and through the various adornments. In this way it is the central theme that is being emphasized by its repetition and by the various elaborations of it here from seals to trumpets to bowls.

The theme of the musical piece in this case is the spread of the gospel throughout the world, the judgment of the world as it continues its rebellion against God, and the suffering that the church must endure as it awaits the return of Christ.

Remember the scroll was sealed with seven seals. In the vision the breaking of the seals one by one does not open the scroll. The scroll is not opened until the seventh seal is broken. So the breaking of the seals one by one represents a preliminary situation before and leading up to the great crisis at the end of the world. Indeed, the period represented by the seals broken one after another seems to be the entire course of history between Christ's first coming and his second, what theologians call the “inter-adventual” period, that is the period between *the two comings*, the first coming of Christ at the incarnation and his Second Coming at the end of history.

### **Text Comment**

v.2 The imagery of the four horsemen, of which we have here the first, is drawn from Zechariah chapters 1 and 6. There the horsemen are sent out to punish the nations that are oppressing God's people. Here in Revelation also the horsemen bring the judgments that are imposed by the Lord Christ upon the world to punish the wicked and to vindicate the people who are trusting in him. [Beale, 372]

Whether this first rider represents good or evil is much discussed and there are sound arguments on both sides. This first rider does not seem to be a malevolent force, a bringer of judgment. No particular woe is mentioned in the case of this first rider as is the case with the next three. In Revelation white stands for righteousness and this is a white horse. Later Christ himself will return to earth on a white horse. Christ is also said to be a conqueror elsewhere in Revelation as this rider is said to be. In the Gospel accounts of the events leading to the Second Coming, such as we have in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the preaching of the Gospel to the ends of the earth is one of the things that precedes the coming of the Lord at the end of history. What the rider intends to conquer, therefore, may well be the nations by means of the gospel. If that is not the case, then he belongs with the other riders as a bringer of judgment, calamity, and trouble to the earth like the riders we will read about in a moment. [Cf. Beale, 375-377] The Parthians were the most famous archers of the ancient world and had won a great victory over a Roman army not so many years before this, a victory that unnerved the Romans. That may have something to do with this rider's carrying a bow rather than a sword. It would be an unsettling image of warfare immediately appreciated by John's readers.

In any case, these riders are at the command of heaven. The commands the riders obey come from the elders standing before the great throne and the weapons they employ are given them in heaven. The Lord is sovereign over the earth, as we have already read on several occasions in Revelation to this point.

- v.4 Warfare in general is visited upon the earth by this rider. You remember the Lord Jesus in his account of the world as it would be until his coming again spoke of wars and rumors of wars and nation rising up against nation.
- v.6 The third rider brings famine and the mysterious voice reminds us that heaven is in control of this as well. The prices listed here are from 10 to 12 times the ordinary price for the same food at the time Revelation was written. Scarcity will make life difficult for many but the famine is not too acute. Heaven does not intend the destruction of the whole earth at this point. Since the roots of the olive tree and grape vine go deeper they would not be affected so much by a drought that would destroy the grain in the fields. [Mounce, 155] In A.D. 92, something that would have been immediately remembered by John's readers, Domitian had ordered half of the vineyards in Asia Minor be cut down to increase grain production which had failed during the famine, but the order caused such a furor that it was rescinded.
- v.8 Pale represents the pallor of death by disease. Hades follows to swallow up those who are killed. You notice that *only* the judgments of the second, third, and fourth horseman are recapitulated – sword, famine, and death by plague and beasts – another argument that the first horseman may be a positive figure bringing the gospel to the world. In any case war, famine, and plague stand not simply for the wars, famines and plagues that beset the life of this world but for *all* the troubles and difficulties of this benighted world of ours. The first four seals are thus a group representing the four horsemen. Now the scene shifts back to heaven.

- v.9 By saying that the souls of the martyrs were under the altar their deaths are said to be a sacrifice offered to God. Paul remember once spoke of his coming death as an offering and, on another occasion, of his being on the point of being sacrificed.
- v.10 Sometimes readers of the Bible have been troubled by this prayer, wondering why, like the Lord Jesus and Stephen, these martyrs did not pray for the forgiveness of their murderers. One commentator goes so far as to say that it is not a Christian prayer, not a prayer that Christians should pray. But, in fact, this prayer to God for the vindication of his people is a prayer we find very often in the Psalms and the rest of the Bible. In fact the wording is an allusion to Psalm 79:10: “make known among the nations that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.” It is a prayer based on the Lord’s own promise to vindicate his people. Remember the Lord Jesus asks rhetorically in Luke 18:7: “Will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night?” The Lord has promised to judge the wicked; it is no sin to pray that he will do what he has promised!
- v.11 We read elsewhere in the NT that this age must continue until all the elect have been called to faith in Christ. Another way of making this point is what is said here: the age of martyrdom cannot end until the church’s sufferings have reached their full measure. The response of the Lord to this prayer comes immediately with the opening of the sixth seal.
- v.15 A very similar list of the groupings of human beings occurs again in 19:18, an indication that we are here reading about the events at the end of the world.
- v.16 “What sinners dread most is not death but the revealed Presence of God.” [Swete, 94] But notice too, the Lamb that had been slain is now also the Judge of all the earth and the one whose wrath terrifies the unbelieving world.
- v.17 With the opening of the sixth seal, John beheld “a set of phenomena which in the prophetic and apocalyptic language of the Bible is the usual way of describing the end of the world.” [Ladd, 106] You find this same language, for example, in the Lord’s Olivette Discourse in Matthew 24. The breaking of the sixth seal brings us to the threshold of the opening of the scroll, which is to say to the end of history.

The seven letters to the seven churches that we read in chapters 2 and 3 we said at the time indicate that Revelation was written *to address the actual situation being faced by Christian people in those days and to be faced by them in coming days*. We also noted that the situation described in those letters is very much the situation that we face ourselves in our day. In taking this description of the world and human history to ourselves we don’t want to get caught up too much in the details that is often been a mistake made by readers and interpreters of Revelation. As one commentator puts it:

“Reviewing the various interpretations assigned to the Four Horsemen tends to rob the contemporary reader of the dramatic nature of the vision itself. It is good to place oneself back in one of the seven churches and listen to the visions as they are being read. Instead of discussing the probable significance of each of the four colored horses those first

listeners would have recoiled in terror as war, bloodshed, famine, and death galloped furiously across the stage of their imagination. [Mounce, cited in Osborne, 283]

What are we being told here about the world in which we live? That world is, in so many ways, a wonderful place and human life in the world a wonderful thing. There is so much beauty everywhere. There is the love of man and woman, of parents and children, and of friends; the remarkable accomplishments of human beings; these things and many more make the world a wonderful place.

But, as everyone knows, the world is also a terrible place. And Revelation focuses much more on that fact and on this reality. And the reason it does so is because it is the more important, the more salient fact about the world. As we read in Ecclesiastes 7:2, it is the funeral more than the party that reveals the meaning and the destiny of this world and of so many human beings who live in it. This world is a place of battle, of struggle; warfare to the death is underway that human beings are often only dimly aware of. The fact that there is so much happiness, satisfaction, and fulfillment partially obscures the deadly and brutal face of human life and the appalling prospect of divine judgment in the world to come.

I think it safe to say that the earliest Christians had not expected that the triumph of Jesus Christ over sin and death, his ascension to the Right Hand of God, and his promise to return to earth, would lead to what it did. We learn at the end of John that many Christians had got the impression that the Lord Jesus would return before the death of the last apostle. It seems clear to me that when the Apostle Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, one of his earliest letters, he himself was under the impression that the Lord Jesus might well return in his lifetime. By the time he wrote his second letter to Timothy he knew that was not to be. And, of course, we are glad it was not to be. There were vast multitudes of saints yet to be called to new life in Christ.

The Christians knew that Christ Jesus sat on the heavenly throne. They knew for a certainty that he ruled over the kings of the earth (1:5) as we have already read in Revelation. But if so, why was the world's history continuing to unfold as it was, so much like history had run for long ages before? After Pentecost a great start had been made to be sure. The church was springing up all over the world, people were becoming Christians in swelling numbers. But think of what else happened. The Roman world had been literally shaken by great earthquakes in A.D. 60 which destroyed cities and took many lives. A Roman army had been humiliated in battle by the Parthians in 62. A great persecution of Christians followed the terrible fire in Rome in 64. The four-year horror of the Jewish war ended in 70 with Jerusalem in ruins. Nero committed suicide in 68 and political chaos and civil war ensued as four different men battled to lay claim to the throne and for a year the Roman world echoed to the tramp of armies on the march. Then in A.D. 79 came the eruption of Vesuvius which obliterated the resorts on the Bay of Naples and had spread such a pall of darkness over the Mediterranean world that people actually spoke of this as a harbinger of the end of the world. And through those years several great famines had occurred, culminating in that of 92 just a few years before Revelation was written. This was the world in which the Christians of the seven churches lived. This was what was happening in that world. Catastrophes of various kinds threatened human beings everywhere and the specter of martyrdom loomed before the church. Hundreds, if not thousands, had already died for their

loyalty to Christ and thousands more were at risk in a society that was deeply offended by the Christian faith and worried by its spectacular growth.

John's vision is meant to assert the sovereignty of Jesus Christ over such a world as that and over history like that! [The above from Caird, 79] And, of course, everything we read here in Revelation 6 we have experienced in our own time on a still greater scale. There never were wars as vast as the wars of the modern world. And there have been wars waged virtually everywhere in the world throughout the modern period of human history. Famine has continued to bedevil human life throughout its history and continues to do so still today in our world, no matter our remarkable agricultural technology. People are starving in many places of the world because of famines produced by drought or by political and economic chaos or by military action. And despite our successes at some points, plague and disease still take untold numbers of human lives every year. Hurricanes and tsunamis, earthquakes and fires: *the four horsemen bestride our world still today!*

And all over the world there are Christians suffering and dying for their faith. The roll of martyrs continues to grow, the number of souls under the altar expands virtually every day that passes. And this, we read here in Revelation 6, is but the beginnings of birth pangs.

Imagine Peter and John in those heady days after Pentecost, after 3,000 were added to the church in a single day from a single sermon. How would they have expected the story to unfold from that point? Not, I daresay as it did, with long years of struggle, of menacing persecution expanding with the growth of the church, and not as long years of the world's heartbreak that would engulf the people of God as well. It was not only unbelievers who were buried in the ash at Pompeii. There were surely Christians in the Roman army that the Parthians destroyed. And we know by the express testimony of the NT that Christians also suffered from the famines that regularly threatened the inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world. This was *not*, I dare say, what the earliest Christians had imagined would be not merely the next fifty, sixty or seventy years but the next two-thousand years of history!

The influential philosopher Alvin Plantinga has written that, in his view, the one still considerable philosophical argument against belief in God, and by God he means the God of the Bible, is the argument from evil. If there is a God why does he permit so much evil, meaning by evil not merely the evil deeds that human beings are guilty of, the evil that one human being does to another, but also evil in the larger sense – catastrophes and tragedies. He puts it this way:

“A talented young woman is invaded by a slow and horrifying disease – so long-lasting that she gets to explore each step down in excruciating detail; a young man of twenty-five, in the flood tide of vigor and full of bright promise, is killed in a senseless climbing accident; a radiant young wife and mother, loved and needed by her family, is attacked by a deadly cancer; a sparkling and lovely child is struck down by leukemia and dies a painful and lingering death: what could be the point of these things? ...my Father has suffered from manic-depressive psychosis for the last fifty years; in his case the manic but not the depressive phase is satisfactorily controlled by drugs – yet the suffering involved in serious clinical depression is almost beyond belief. What is supposed to be the good in that? Why does God permit these things? The sheer *extent* of suffering and

evil in the world is appalling. In one extended battle during the Chinese civil war six million people were killed. What about Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot and a thousand lesser villains? Why does God permit so *much* evil in his world?

“And sometimes we get a sense of the demonic – of evil naked and pure. Those with power over others may derive great pleasure from devising exquisite torture for their victims: a woman in a Nazi concentration camp is forced to choose which of her children shall be sent to the ovens and which preserved. Why does God permit all this evil, and evil of these horrifying kinds, in his world? How can it be seen as fitting in with his loving and providential care for his creatures?” [*Philosophers Who Believe*, 70]

What Prof. Plantinga is asking is how can God permit the four horsemen to remain in the world: the terrorist attacks on 9-11, the tsunami, earthquakes, war in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Africa, starvation in many places, not just Darfur or Somalia, consuming adults and children alike, AIDS and other diseases causing havoc throughout the world.

Now Plantinga, the Christian philosopher, goes on to make the two points that must always be made in fashioning an answer to that question. The first is that God has not stood by indifferently while the world has suffered. He entered this world and suffered himself for the salvation of the world. He has shared in our sufferings. That must always be remembered. If there is suffering it is not unknown to or unfelt by God. He knows the world’s pain and feels that pain. That certainly helps us to realize that the world’s suffering is necessary. God, who knows what it is to suffer as the world suffers, would not allow it were it not necessary, however little we may understand of that necessity. *It was the Lamb who had been slain who dispatched the four horsemen!*

The second point is that while it is undoubtedly true that terrible suffering and evil raise great questions in our minds, questions we cannot help but ask, it is also true that apart from the existence of the God as revealed to us in Holy Scripture, those questions are meaningless. The reason we wonder and worry and stand perplexed about the evil that we encounter or observe in the world is precisely because we feel that there is something wrong, something perverse, something unjust about it. *It should not be!* But, of course, if there is no God, if there is no personal future for human beings, none of that makes any sense at all. A naturalistic world, a world in which matter is all there is, is not a world of good and evil, it is simply what exists. It is an accident of our genetic makeup that we have come to think something evil or unjust. If there is not a way things *ought to be* then there cannot be, in the nature of the case, *a violation of the way things ought to be*. Without God there can be no evil, so the argument from evil is not really an argument against the existence of God; it is an argument *for* his existence, the existence of the infinite, personal God who himself justifies our perceptions of the reality of good and evil! All of that is very true and very important to say.

But, *that* is not John’s point. John’s point is that the evil that we see in the world, the tragedy, the suffering, the cruelty, the injustice, the failure of life to come to its fulfillment, all of that is God’s doing! He is in absolute control. The four horsemen are sent from heaven, they receive their power and authority in heaven, and they do their work in answer to a summons that was given them in heaven in obedience to the assignment they received at the throne of God. The world is in the process of being saved and that part of it that is not to be saved stands under

divine judgment. *That is the point of this series of scenes as one seal after another is broken.* And in the midst of that judgment the church herself suffers. She suffers in the same way her Savior suffered; she suffers in the same way the world suffers: she suffers from war, famine, and disease and she suffers additionally the persecutions of the enemies of Christ. And all of this, in all of its inscrutable darkness and difficulty, is the will of God and comes from heaven because something is happening in the world that God sees fit to bring to pass!

In our day, we might expect, we might even *demand* that John stop to answer the questions that are churned up by these assertions about war and famine and disease. If this is divine judgment being visited upon the world, why does it not make more of a discrimination between the deserving and the undeserving; why do the best people suffer beside the worst? If this is divine judgment why do babies and little children, too young to have made a conscious choice to do evil, suffer with those whose behavior is very clearly their own responsibility? If there is a judgment to come in the next world, why does there need to be so much judgment in this? If this world is the Devil's kingdom and if the Devil and his demons are active agents in it, if man is sinful and much of what happens is the direct result of man's sinful and selfish choices, how are we to understand God's control? Who is responsible for all of this mayhem and misery: the Devil, man himself, or God? Or is it all of them together in different respects and different ways?

All of those questions have answers, though, of course, mere human beings will never be able to explain the ways of God in anything other than the most general way. We know far too little of what God is doing and why to explain the course of events in the world or in any life in the world. Our minds are far too small; we see far too little of what is really happening; we can't see where it is all going and how it is all to be resolved.

But again, answering those kinds of questions is not now John's point. His point is to assert the truth that lies in the foundation of any true understanding of the world and its history: viz. that it is *all* under God's control. God is not asking, Christ is not asking to be taken off the hook, to be excused for what is happening in the world. The Devil is doing great evil as he rages against the kingdom of God, to be sure – the Bible often enough describes that evil and shows us the devil doing it and we will see more of his evil in Revelation –; man is doing great evil and making matters so much worse for himself – that too is obvious and a frequent teaching of Holy Scripture –; but above and behind it all, waging war for the world and the souls of men, using and exploiting the Devil's hatred of all that is good and man's selfish clamoring for his own interests at the expense of others, is the plan and purpose of God, written as it is in that scroll the seals of which the Lamb is breaking one by one.

Wars, famine, disease – all the heartbreak of human life (including all of *your* heartbreak, trouble and sorrow) – and the persecution of the church and her struggles in a world of sin and enmity toward God and Christ, all of this is about what God is doing in the world in the interest of salvation and judgment. It is all leading up to and preparing for the consummation of all things at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. No one knows anything about anything who does not understand this. Every trial you undergo as a Christian, every difficulty that you face as a human being, it is in every case a piece of this larger drama of salvation and judgment. Your life as a Christian, for that matter every single human life on the face of the earth, is what it is because the Lamb of God is breaking the seals of the scroll one by one.

When a soldier finds himself in a desperate battle, crouching for his life in a foxhole with bullets whizzing over his head, the air filled with the thunder and whistling shrapnel of enemy artillery, he does not turn to his comrades or peek above the parapet and ask in offended tones: “Why is everyone shooting *at me*? Was it something I said?” He knows very well that the danger he faces, the ordeal through which he is passing is because of something far larger than himself. He is but a single participant in a great war with mighty forces far larger than himself ranged against one another and great issues far greater than his own personal peace and happiness at stake. He realizes that his personal agony, his terror, his weariness, his wounds take their meaning from the great struggle than has consumed him and so many others.

The souls beneath the altar bear witness to this. They are the casualties of a great war and there will be many others like them before that war has been finally and decisively brought to its end. But that it will end in victory and vindication for the followers of Jesus Christ is the one absolute certainty of human history. The Lamb himself, the Son of God, is breaking the seals!

The world hears the gospel being proclaimed and sees the multitude from every tongue, tribe, and nation declaring the praises of Jesus Christ but it does not reckon with the fact that the Lamb who was slain is also the Lamb whose wrath is already bringing judgment upon the unbelieving and the ungodly warning them of still greater judgment to come. The world sees the war, the carnage, the famine, the disease, but it does not see the horsemen bringing it all from heaven. And it does not reckon with the great deal more of the same that is to come. As a result it utterly misunderstands the meaning of human life and history. The Christian knows that everything about his or her life takes its meaning from these larger, these cosmic realities and from the end to which history is inexorably proceeding according to the plan, purpose and the victory of God. Everything, absolutely everything that happens in this world, good and bad is finally significant only for the role it plays in fulfilling the divine purposes of judgment and salvation. That is the meaning of everything.

Whatever your life is now, whatever you wish it to be, wherever you wish it to go, be sure you are always first and foremost aware of the scroll and the seals that have so far been broken, the scroll so soon to be opened, and history so soon to be brought to its end.