

The First Six Seals: The Tribulation Begins (Part 2)

Revelation 6:1-17

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Well, turn with me, if you would, to Revelation chapter 6. I want to begin by reading this chapter. We find ourselves beginning the great tribulation, the first six seals, as the tribulation itself begins. Let's read together. You follow along as I read this passage of scripture.

Then I saw when the Lamb broke one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, "Come!" I looked, and behold, a white horse, and the one who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. When He broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come!" And another, a red horse, went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that people would kill one another; and a large sword was given to him. When He broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, "Come!" I looked, and behold, a black horse, and the one who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard something like a voice in the center of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not damage the oil and the wine." When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, "Come!" I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and the one who sat on it had the name Death, and Hades was following with him. Authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, and famine, and plague, and by the wild animals of the earth. When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been killed because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who live on the earth?" And a white robe was given to each of them; and they were told that they were to rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers and sisters who were to be killed even as they had been, was completed also. And I

looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became as black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the eminent people, and the commanders and the wealthy and the strong, and every slave and free person hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they *said to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the [m]sight 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 is able to stand?”

In this amazing chapter, Jesus Christ, our Lord, initiates the devastating judgments of the seven-year tribulation with the breaking of the first six seals on the scroll that is the title deed to the earth, the scroll, the title deed that He alone is worthy to open. The seven seals, also, as we pointed out, describe a series of sequential divine judgments that God will pour out on this rebellious earth.

Just to remind you what we studied last time, we looked at the first four seals. The first four seals are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. They are unique and stand alone. We noted that the first seal, in verses 1 and 2, describes Antichrist’s false peace. It’s a mimic, a poor representation of the great and final peace that our Lord Jesus Christ will bring. But it is short-lived because the second seal, in verses 3 and 4, and the second horseman represents war. That treaty that Antichrist makes at the beginning of the tribulation that seems to promise world peace will be quickly shattered with world war. The third seal, in verses 5 and 6, is famine where inflation, because of war and because of all that has happened, will take hold and inflation will cause the prices of the basic necessities of life to go up to the extent that a person will have to work all day just to provide food for himself or for his family with no money left over at the end. The fourth seal, in verses 7 and 8, is a death of one fourth of the world’s population that survived the war and the famine - a fourth of the world’s population. We looked at all of those last week. Tonight,

we come to the fifth seal in verses 9-11, and we'll call it "Divine Justice" and I'll fill that out and saying it as we go along.

Let's begin in verse 9. "When the Lamb broke the fifth seal." Now, according to the Lord's timeline in the Olivet Discourse - the message He gave from the Mount of Olives looking back over the temple about the future - according to the timeline in His sermon, the first four seals that we've studied so far occur in the first half of the tribulation. You can read about that in Matthew 24:4-14. And those first four seals mark the beginning of God's wrath. It is still, in the first half, God's Wrath, but it is merely the beginning. The fifth seal that I just read about is a bridge. It's a bridge from the first half of the tribulation to the second half. And in the second half, the world sees the full fury of God's wrath. The first four seals focus on events that unfold here on the earth. The fifth seal shifts to the throne room of heaven. It focuses on the throne room of heaven, on a group of people that I want us to look at and consider together as we unpack this fifth seal.

First of all, as we look at this group that's identified, let's look at their identity. Verse 9, "when the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar." Now, "altar" obviously conjures up what picture? A temple. A heavenly temple. If you remember back in chapters 4 and 5, heaven was represented as the great palace room of a king, the throne room of a king. Here in chapter 6, it's a temple. What is the altar? Well, consistently the altar in heaven in the Book of Revelation is a heavenly parallel to the altar of incense which stood in the earthly temple. You can read about it in Exodus 40. The altar of incense in the earthly temple and this one that's represented in heaven pictured the prayers of God's people and, you see this again and again. Each day, the selected priest was responsible to burn fresh incense on the altar of incense in the temple using coals that had been taken from the bronze altar where the sacrifices had been made. So, the priest would go get those coals off the altar where the sacrifice has been made, carry them in a pan along with incense into the holy place where they're set, the altar of incense, right in front of the great curtain that separated the holy place from the holy of holies. And the priests would put together that incense with those hot coals and the incense, the smoke of the incense, will begin to rise and it would waft over that curtain into the holy of holies representing the prayers of God's people entering His presence. It was at the time of the burning of incense that people gathered outside the temple for prayer because that's what it symbolized. And I love that picture. Think about that, Christian. Every time you pray, it's like the smoke of the incense on that altar of

incense blows into the presence of God. It's a sweet smell in His nostrils as He hears the dependent prayers of His people crying out to Him for their help. Verse 9 says, "I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain." I mean, clearly these are martyrs for their faith in Jesus Christ. And here, they're described as "souls" because their bodies have not yet been resurrected. That'll happen to this group in chapter 20, verse 4, and we'll get there.

So, who are these martyrs, the souls of those who had been slain in verse 9? Some argue they're all the martyrs of the entire church age. But that can't be true because, in their prayer that we're going to examine in just a moment, these martyrs specifically state that those who killed them still live on the earth. So, these martyrs must have been those who are killed during the first half of the tribulation. These, then, are tribulation martyrs killed during the first three and a half years of the tribulation period. As God carries out His own judgement of sinners, Satan, his demons, and Antichrist carry out worldwide, systematic persecution of believers. This persecution will begin during the first half of the tribulation, shortly after the rapture. Again, Jesus promises this will happen in the first half of the tribulation in the Olivet Discourse. But it will intensify dramatically at the midpoint once Antichrist makes it clear his true intentions, once he establishes himself as an object of worship in the temple in Jerusalem. Listen to Revelation 13:7, "it was also given to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them, and authority over every tribe, and people, and tongue, and nation was given to him." In other words, he will carry out a systematic persecution of the people of God across this planet. Undoubtedly, believers will be labeled with labels such as idolaters. That happened, by the way, in the Roman time. I don't know if you realize that, but often Christians were accused in Rome of being idolaters because they didn't worship the gods of Rome. They worshiped someone else. That will undoubtedly happen. Blasphemers might be another label. Certainly, traitors for opposing the worship of Antichrist and sort of refusing to give their allegiance to his government. It's interesting that chapter 9, verse 21, says that there will be an extensive increase in murders during this period of time and I think believers will undoubtedly be the victims of many of those murders including mob violence, vigilante justice as Antichrist gives permission to people to take out their vendettas. I tell you, if you want to see the ugliness of the human heart, then just look at what happened in places like Jedwabne in Poland when the Nazis didn't actually come in and kill the Jewish people, all they did was give permission for the people in those places to kill them themselves and take their belongings. And that's exactly what happened. Pogrom after pogrom

have happened as people were murdered and their possessions taken just because they were given permission to do so by the Nazis.

So, this is what will happen, worldwide persecution. But as soon as those true believers are killed here on earth, they'll be received into God's presence. By the way, who are these believers? They're not those who were alive at the time of the rapture. Before the tribulation period, all those believers who are here on the earth will be raptured and when Jesus returns - 1 Thessalonians 4, 1 Corinthians 15 - we've examined that before. So, who are these martyrs, these who believe who are martyred? They will come to faith during the tribulation period. As we will see, there will be many countless numbers who come to faith during the tribulation period as God not only exhibits His justice and judgment, but His mercy and grace as well. So here, they're pictured as under the altar because, in their death, it's as if they offered themselves as a sacrifice to God, their loyalty to Him. They're connected to the altar of incense here because they're praying.

But why were they killed? Why were they martyred? Notice verse 9 gives the reason. "Because of the word of God and because of the testimony which they had maintained." Now, it's possible those are two different reasons, but I really think there's only one. I think the second statement merely defines the first. They were martyred because of the word of God and their consistent testimony to the truth of that word. A testimony which the Greek text literally says, "they were having." So, these individuals were killed during the early days of the tribulation during the first three and a half years because they were faithful witnesses by their lives and their words to the word of God. And because of that, God's enemies, in their anger, determined to kill God's witnesses. As I've shared with you so many times before, mankind can't get to God. If they could get to God, they would kill Him. They would pull Him from His throne and crush His life, if that were possible but they can't. So, what do they do? They attack those in His image and particularly those who worship Him. That's their identity. They are tribulation saints - those who are saved during the first half of the tribulation and are martyred because of their faith.

Notice in verse 10, their prayer. Their prayer reveals the content of the fifth seal. Now, don't misunderstand the fifth seal. It's not martyrdom. Some people teach that but martyrdom is not a judgment from God, all right? These seals are about God's wrath on evil. God's people are not evil. Martyrdom is not evil. No, that's not it at all. Instead, the fifth seal is a call for divine justice

from God's people who have been martyred. It's a prayer to God and it's a prayer God will certainly answer in His time. So, look at this prayer.

First of all, notice its passion. Verse 10 says, “they cried out with a loud voice saying.” The Greek word translated “cried out” here is a word of deep emotion and that emotion is reflected in loud prayers. Notice its impatience. “How long?” If you're familiar with the Psalms, you know that that is a common cry of the righteous when they're in the midst of their suffering, especially suffering at the hands of the wicked. Psalm 13:1, Psalm 35:17, you have this, “how long, Lord? How long are You going to wait before You intervene?” Notice this prayer's recipient. Verse 10 says, “O Lord, holy and true.” It's a very unusual The Greek word here for Lord. It's not the normal word “Kyrios.” This word is used only here in the New Testament. It's the Greek word that comes into English as despot. It doesn't mean God is evil. It underscores God's absolute control over everything in this world because this despot is, notice, “holy.” He cannot tolerate evil. And He's “true.” He's always faithful to His own character and to His word. Notice their prayer's appeal. Verse 10, “how long, O Lord, holy and true, will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Now notice, first of all, there's a great lesson in prayer here. They're not demanding things of God. They're asking a question and they're making an appeal. That's the right way, whatever you do. You know, if you want to see a loved one healed, you don't demand that of God. You do as they're doing here. You ask a question. You make an appeal. And you entrust it to God. Their prayer in verse 10 is that God would carry out justice toward those who killed them. Notice the expression, “those who dwell on the earth.” That is a semi-technical term throughout the Book of Revelation for unregenerate mankind in its hostility toward God. It's used a number of times in Revelation. You're saying, “God, when? When are you going to judge? When are you going to avenge our blood? We were martyred. Our lives were taken. We were murdered.” That's really what they're saying. “When are you going to bring justice to bear on those who murdered us?” Now, please understand that what's happening in verse 10 is very different from the anger and bitterness that motivates the desire for personal revenge. This is, instead, a call for justice.

Now, what are the lessons we can see from that? There are a couple I just want to pause and bring to your attention, because I don't think we think about this often.

First of all, Biblically, when we are wronged or sinned against, our primary desire in prayer should be for the salvation of those who have sinned against us. That should be your first reaction. Like Stephen, in Acts 7:60, falling on his knees, he, “cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’” That should be our first reaction when we are sinned against. But, that doesn’t mean that’s not all we should ever ask or pray for. If they will not turn, if they refuse to repent, then it’s right, as well, to pray that God will give them the justice they deserve. I’ve prayed this many times, “Lord, save them. Bring them to truth faith. But if they absolutely refuse Your grace, then bring justice to bear on the horrible sin they have committed against this other person.” This is right and legitimate and it’s a reflection of the character of God. God is a God of justice. He’s a God of mercy and grace, but He’s also a God of perfect justice who will not allow a single wrong to go un-righted.

A second lesson here is: there’s a lesson in this prayer of these martyrs about the relationship between sovereignty and prayer. Think about it like this. God has already determined to judge this planet. That’s clear. But God will do that, in this case, in answer to the prayers of His people. The God who determines the ends, the judgment of this world, also determines the means, the prayers of His people. Look at chapter 8, verse 3. This is in the seventh seal, but I want you to see the relationship between God’s judgment on this world and the prayers of God’s people. Verse 3 says,

Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense ascended from the angel’s hand with the prayers of the saints before God. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar, and hurled it to the earth; and there were peals of thunder and sounds, and flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

And judgment comes. You see the relationship? God is going to judge this planet. He will avenge those who martyred His people in answer to their prayers while, at the very same time, keeping His eternal purpose and plan. They go together hand in glove. So, let me plead with you to pray. Pray. Because, when you ask God to act - you don’t demand of God - but when you ask God to act, God may have already determined in eternity past to do that very thing you’re asking

but to do so in answer to your prayer. That's how sovereignty and prayer fit together. We're not changing the mind of God, our prayers fit hand in glove with the mind of God, and He has already determined what He's going to do, but He may have determined to do it in answer to your prayers, just as is the case here, in this text.

So, back to the fifth seal. We've seen the identity of these people, the souls under the altar. They're the tribulation martyrs, those who came to faith and were killed during the first three and a half years of the tribulation. We've seen their prayer. But notice, in verse 11, their comfort. God responds to their prayer and comforts them with a symbolic gift and a spoken word.

Notice, first of all, the symbolic gift. It's a white robe. Verse 11 says, "and there was given to each of them a white robe." Now, first of all, these are not literal robes since, at this time, their bodies have not been resurrected. They are souls. This is, instead, symbolic. And throughout Revelation the white robe - in Greek, by the way, it's a long, flowing robe that reaches to the feet, a stole. It's symbolic in Revelation of the forgiveness and the justification that belonged to all who are in Jesus Christ. So, the robe says you've been redeemed. You've been justified. You wear the righteousness of Jesus Christ. I like the way Revelation 7:14 puts it, "they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." That's the picture. So, in comforting them, God says, "you may have been killed for your faith but I just want you to know that I affirm you are Mine. You've been declared right with Me. You wear the righteousness of My own Son."

Also, there is, in comforting them, a spoken word. Verse 11 says, "and they were told" - probably told by the Lord Himself, we can't be absolutely sure - "and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer." John Walvoord points out that, "what Christ says to these martyrs gives us some insight into the complicated issue of why God allows evil to continue. It's clear from God's response in verse 11, that He will allow this evil, the continued martyrdom of His people, for a time in order to accomplish His own purposes." So, think about it. God determined that allowing the killing of the followers of Christ will be best and wisest from the standpoint of His entire plan. Although, when we see that, it's really hard for us to grasp from our vantage point. But you understand this if you're a parent or you are enough of an adult to interact with parents and to see how this unfolds, you see there are times when parents do things that are hard. They get a treatment for their child's illness, or whatever, that's a hard thing for that child to

go through. But the parent knows that the final result, the plan, is best. Our Father's like that. It was difficult for these martyrs to understand why God would allow their murderers to continue living but notice God told them to rest. I love that. "Rest for a little while longer." In other words, rest and enjoy the blessings of heaven and then wait. Wait for justice. Notice, "for a little while longer." That expression is used in John's gospel and later in Revelation for periods of time ranging from a few days to about a year. So, it's a relatively short time. In this case, it's about three and a half years from the midpoint of the tribulation until Christ's second coming. He says, "wait for a little while longer." It's coming. Rest and wait.

Verse 11 says, "and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer" - and here's why. Here's what has to happen - "until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also." Now, there are probably two different groups in that statement at the end of verse 11. First of all, God is saying here, He will not complete His judgment of the evil in this world and those who killed His people until this first group is complete, until the number of the elect have been saved. Notice, "until the number of their fellow servants is complete." I think that's talking, specifically, about those who will yet be saved. God is not done saving people in the tribulation period. And the second group, I think. He says, "until the full number of martyrs have been completed." Notice, "their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, is complete." So, God says, "wait. Wait. Because My plan's not done. There are those on earth suffering the judgments that I'm unfolding here going to hear the gospel, were going to come to faith. They're My people. I've given them to Christ in eternity past. I've given them to My Son as a gift of My love, and I'm going to draw them to Myself. I'm going to redeem them. Wait." And He says, wait because there're going to be others like you, who are going to be saved, and are going to be faithful and true to the word of God, and are going to be killed because of their faith. Wait. God has a plan and He's working out every detail and His plan will not be hurried and it will not be delayed.

There are several lessons I think we can learn from this fifth seal. Let me just point them out briefly to you. First of all, Christ has sovereignly determined those who will be martyred for Him. You ever thought about that? It's not an accident. He knows, and He doesn't just know, He decided. We need to accept His plans for our lives. If that's what He determines for us, He will give us grace to face it and we need to receive it as from Him. I love the interchange between

Jesus and Peter and John in John 21. You remember that? It's after the Lord restores Peter in John 21. Look at it. In fact, turn to John 21, and look at verse 18. He's talking to Peter. He says, "truly, truly I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wish; but when you grow old." Okay, first of all, Jesus is saying, "I'm sovereign over your life story and you're going to live a long full life. You're going to grow old and that's when you're going to die." Jesus determined that for Peter and let me tell you, He's determined what He's going to do in your life as well. Young, old, it's His decision. And then He says,

you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go. Now this He said signifying by what kind of death Peter would glorify God.

In other words, Jesus says, "I've determined how long you're going to live and I've determined how you're going to die." And in Peter's case, He says, "you're going to die as a martyr for Me," which, of course, was exactly true. And then He says, "follow Me." "Follow Me." That's what Jesus says to us. I don't expect that any of us in this room will be martyred for our faith. I think, maybe, our children's children will be. But, if it comes in our lifetime, that will be Christ's decision, and His alone. And He will give us the grace to face it. And then, I love Peter. Verse 20, Peter turns around sees John. So in verse 21, Peter says to Jesus, "Lord, what about him? If I'm going to live to old age and then be martyred, what about John?" And I love Jesus' response. He says, "if I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me." In the end, it's Jesus' decision and we need to trust Him. He sovereignly determined those who are going to be martyred for Him and we need to accept that.

A second lesson here is Christ allows our enemies to do nothing against us, apart from His sovereign plan. I love the restraint. I love, "you wait. I've got a plan. I'm working it out."

Thirdly, Christ, will abundantly reward all, who are persecuted because of their faith in Him. You see that here, right? You see the way He receives them. You remember what Jesus said about those who are persecuted, in the Sermon on the Mount? He said, "blessed are you because great is your reward in heaven." So, when you're persecuted, when you're insulted, when you're passed over for the promotion because you're straightforward about your faith, when you're called a nut, when people talk behind your back, when they think of you as a "Bible thumper," an idiot, rejoice. Jesus says, "I hear. I know. And great is your reward in heaven."

Number four: Christ, sees and knows every thought, word, and act that is perpetrated against His own, and He will correct every injustice. I've quoted for you before one of my favorite songs. There are so few songs. In fact, I don't really know of another song about God's justice, but Andrew Peterson, wrote this song and it says this, listen carefully.

Every stone that makes you stumble
And cuts you when you fall
Every serpent here that strikes your heel
To curse you when you crawl
The King of love one day will crush them all

And every sad seduction, and every clever lie
Every word that woos and wounds the pilgrim, children of the sky
The King of love will break them by and by

And then I love this verse, listen carefully.

If a thief had come to plunder
When the children were alone
If he ravaged every daughter
And murdered every son
Would not the Father see this?
Would not His anger burn?
Would He not repay the tyrant
In the day of His return?
Await, await the day of His return
I know you need a savior
He's patient in His anger
But He will rise up in the end

There's nothing wrong with rejoicing in the justice of God. Pray for the salvation of those who are enemies, but if they refuse to repent, if they refuse to turn, then it's okay to desire that God's justice would be done.

That brings us to the sixth seal. The sixth seal in verses 12-17 is supernatural disasters. The sixth and seventh seal, along with the trumpets and bowls to come, together describe events in the second half of the tribulation, the second three and a half years. Now, let me remind you the context. Before this sixth seal occurs, Antichrist will break his treaty with Israel, made at the beginning of the tribulation, and he will erect himself as an object of worship in the temple in Jerusalem, an event that Daniel calls the abomination of desolation. Antichrist will demand, and the world will offer, worship of him. He will unleash, in response to that, a massive wave of persecution against those who refuse to worship him and they will soar holy be and New Testament believers. In spite of all that has transpired to this point in the tribulation, amazingly most people will still attempt to carry on normal lives. Matthew 24:37-39 say they're going to eat and drink, they're going to be given in marriage. Life, to some extent, is going to try to carry on normally. But the sixth seal, the one we come to now, unleashes catastrophic destruction on this planet and it will bring two important changes. First of all, it will end business as usual and, secondly with this seal, the entire world will know that these judgments are divine, that they come from God.

Now, when Christ breaks the sixth seal, there will be six catastrophic disasters that result in verses 12-14. The first five seals were the actions of humans, in some way, but with the sixth seal, God acts alone.

Now, before we interpret it, let me just give you some pitfalls to avoid in interpreting these disasters. One is making them purely symbolic. That's not how you would interpret any other document that doesn't read like this is a symbolic event. There's symbolic language, but it's clear. These are real events. Another danger is ignoring the fact that there is some hyperbolic language in them. Some hyperbole. A third danger is blending a symbolic and literal interpretation together and, sort of, deciding which you think is literal in which you think is symbolic. That's a very shaky hermeneutic method. The best hermeneutic is to see these events as literal disasters that occur exactly as they are described while, at the same time, acknowledging that at times, the language may be semi-poetic or hyperbolic - and I'll point that out to you as we go along. Robert Thomas in his excellent detailed commentary on the book of Revelation puts it this way, speaking of these disasters, "they are shattering enough to leave human beings with the full impression that the ultimate end has arrived, but they are not

comprehensive enough to amount to the total destruction of creation's order. Human life continues after these disruptions." All right. So, let's look at these six catastrophic disasters.

The first one is a worldwide earthquake. Verse 12, "I looked when He broke the sixth seal and there was a great earthquake." Literally, the Greek text says, "there was a seismos mega."

According to the Olivet Discourse, our Lord, talking about the future, He said there would be frequent earthquakes that occurred during the first half of the tribulation, according to Matthew, 27: 24-27. Later, Revelation tells us after this, there will be an even greater earthquake in 16-18, but this earthquake will be the greatest earthquake that's ever occurred up to that time.

Throughout human history, God has often manifested His presence in earthquakes, often in judgment. But this one is more than just an earthquake. Not only will the earth be shaken, so will the heavens because it's not just an earthquake.

The second catastrophe is the sun is blackened. Verse 12 says, "and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair." Sack cloth was a coarse cloth made from the black hair of goats for mourners to wear. Do you hear what John is saying? In the aftermath of the great earthquake, the sun will be as black as the clothes a mourner wears. Joel describes these events connected to the day of the Lord. Joel 2:31, "the sun will be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes." It's likely that the cause for this darkening of the sun is the resulting volcanic activity from the great earthquake. Volcanoes all over this planet will erupt, spewing ash and smoke into the sky and obscuring the sun. It's possible that's what's intimated here.

Thirdly, the moon will be like blood. Verse 12 says, "the whole moon became" – and notice the word like, that's a key word – "the whole moon became like blood in its color." In other words, the worldwide earthquake will undoubtedly be accompanied, as I said, by huge amounts of volcanic activity and those volcanoes will produce smoke and ash that will make the moon appear blood-red. Isaiah talks about this. Isaiah 13:10, "the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light. The sun will be dark when it rises and the moon will not shed its light." Joel 2:10, "before them the earth quakes, the heavens tremble, the sun and the moon grow dark, and the stars lose their brightness." Just imagine, for a moment, what that will be like. You've just had a worldwide earthquake. If you've ever been in a large earthquake that's localized, it is a terrifying event. Can you imagine one that shakes the entire planet? And then,

because of all of the resulting devastation, because of the volcanoes and the smoke and the ash - and we've just seen pictures of that in the news - because of all that, the sun is obscured, the moon obscured, the normal cycles of daylight and darkness are disrupted. Twenty-four hours a day it's like this twilight. The daily life of every person on this planet will be disrupted. If you think that the Covid pandemic has disrupted life on this planet, you have no idea what's coming. The result of this will be panic. And then, out of the darkened sky will come another catastrophic disaster.

Fourthly, the stars fall. Verse 13, “and the stars of the sky fell to the earth.” Now, the Greek word translated “stars” here can refer to literal stars, the way we use the word in English, but the Greek word can also be used to refer to smaller objects in the heavens and I think that's clearly what's implied here. I mean, after all, an actual star could not approach the earth without incinerating it before it got close. And in chapter 8, verse 12, when the fourth trumpet judgment sounds, the stars are still in their places. So here, John is likely describing an asteroid or meteor shower that enters earth's atmosphere and impacts earth, creating huge devastation. This meteor shower is so large that it seems as if the stars themselves are falling to earth. Verse 13 goes on to say, “as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind.” Green, unripe figs easily fall in a strong wind and the size and scope of this meteor storm is so great that it will be like figs dropping from a tree down onto the surface of this planet.

Relating to all of this, there is a fifth catastrophe and that is: earth's atmosphere is damaged. Verse 14 says, “the sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up.” You know, we worry, and rightly so, about damage to our atmosphere letting in harmful rays. We try to make changes that are some way going to tweak that. Well, this is going to be way beyond any problem we've seen here. It's described as if a scroll is unrolled. And that scroll unrolled now, splits in the middle, what happens? It naturally rolls from the middle to the side and forms a roll on each end. John says that's like what's going to happen to the sky. Now, don't misunderstand here. This cannot be the ultimate destruction of the earth's atmosphere. That comes later in chapter 21, verse 1, when Christ destroys this universe and makes another. But this fifth disaster seriously damages the atmosphere of this planet. It will seem like the universe itself is tearing apart.

A sixth catastrophe is the earth's tectonic plates shift. Verse 14 says, “and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.” Notice, by the way, there is no “like” or “as” in that

sentence. In conjunction with the worldwide earthquake and the resulting volcanic activity, the entire crust of the earth becomes unstable and begins to shift. Later in chapter 16, verse 20, there'll be another change to the surface of the earth on an even grander scale. But here, John is using, I think, some degree of hyperbole because if every mountain was removed at this stage, there would be no hiding place in the mountains in verse 16. So apparently, many will move. Some will even disappear, but it's not until the seventh bowl judgment in chapter 16, verse 20, that every mountain is leveled. But these six catastrophic disasters that come out of this sixth seal see the most terrifying disasters to ever strike this planet. They are not natural disasters. They are supernatural disasters. They will be far beyond any doomsday scenario that a scientist or some script writer could ever imagine. And these devastating supernatural disasters will create universal terror, verses 15-17. It's interesting. What strikes terror into the hearts of men on the earth will not primarily even be the disasters themselves, but the thought of God on His throne.

First of all, in verse 15, we meet the classes that are affected by this terror. John lists seven categories in verse 15 that include every living person. He focuses, however, on the upper classes on the leaders of the earth. In the end, the point he's going to make in verse 15 is that not a single one of God's enemies, regardless of his position or power, is going to escape the judgment of God. Notice the list. Verse 15. "then the kings of the earth." That's the heads of state across the world. "And the great men" These are other high-ranking government officials. "And the commanders." This Greek word describes the Roman tribune commanders in the Roman army who oversaw a thousand men. These were the ones who actually ordered troops into battle. So, these are the military leaders. "And the rich." These are those who control the commerce and business of this planet, those who lead a large multinational companies. "And the strong." These are the powerful and the influential across all aspects of society. And then he adds, "and every slave and free man." In the first century, these two categories included everybody else. So, all unbelievers living on this planet, regardless of their position, power, or wealth, notice verse 15 says, "hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains." Clearly, God's judgment is going to be felt worldwide and all classes of people, without exception, will experience those judgments and they'll know that those judgments are from God. They will know the end of the world is near and they will panic. They will hide in the caves and in the mountains. Undoubtedly, the reason for their hiding isn't just to shield themselves from the face of God, it's to shield themselves from the meteor shower, from the havoc that like bombs from the sky are

creating everywhere. Undoubtedly, those who live in the cities, will hide in bomb shelters and subways, all of this to shield themselves from the things falling from the sky.

Go back to Isaiah chapter 2 because here you get a picture of what the Lord is doing. Beginning in verse 12, God says a day of reckoning is coming. Notice verse 12, “for the LORD of hosts will have a day of reckoning against everyone who is proud and lofty, against everyone who is lifted up, that he may be abased.” What does that look like? Go down to verse 17.

The pride of man will be humbled and the loftiness of men will be abased; and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day, but the idols will completely vanish. Men will go into caves of the rocks and in the holes of the ground, before the terror of the LORD and the splendor of His majesty, when He arises to make the earth tremble. In that day, men will cast away to the moles and the bats, their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they have made themselves to worship, in order to go into the caverns of the rocks and the clefts of the cliffs before the terror of the LORD and the splendor of His majesty when He arises to make the earth tremble. Stop regarding man whose breath of life is in his nostrils for why should he be esteemed?

This is what's being described in our text in Revelation. All the people on this planet, every class, every position, all the influential and those who are unknown and nobody's, they'll all be in terror.

Notice the cry of terror in verse 16. “And they said to the mountains and the rocks, ‘fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne’ - that's God, the Father - “and from the wrath of the Lamb” - that's, of course, Jesus Christ, our Lord. The judgment of God will be so great as a result of the seals that those living will prefer anything, including death itself, to continuing to have to face it. They want to die rather than continue this and they want to be hidden from God. You know, it's interesting, isn't it? All the way back in the garden of Eden, what was man's sinful first reaction when he sinned? Hide from God. That will everlastingly be the response of those who refuse to repent.

Then in verse 17, we learn the cause of their terror. Pick it up in verse 16, “the wrath of the Lamb.” This is the only time in scripture, by the way, where this expression occurs, and it's a

very unusual expression. The gentlest of all of God's creatures filled with wrath but don't forget back in chapter 5, verse 6, we learned that this Lamb has horns. He has power. Our Lord Jesus Christ is going to be the One who carries out this judgment on the earth. Twice, only twice, during His earthly life are we told that Jesus had wrath. Both of those times are when He cleansed the temple - at the beginning of His ministry and at the end of His ministry. But during the tribulation, the Lamb who was slain will rage like a lion of the tribe of Judah. Verse 17 goes on, hide us, "for the great day of Their wrath has come." "The great day of their wrath," is a synonym for that Old Testament expression, "the day of the Lord," we just saw in Joel and we've seen in other places. Here, in this case, the day of the Lord has begun but it's not finished. Still to come are the seventh seal, the seven trumpet judgments, and the seven bowl judgments. Those are still coming during the second half of the tribulation. Undoubtedly during the first four seals and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, those alive had to know that this was beyond ordinary, right? I mean, in such a short period of time, they have to understand this is true. But once the fifth seal occurs, the entire world will know that what they're suffering is not natural, but supernatural. They will know that, "the great day of Their wrath has come."

And verse 17 ends with this, "and who is able to stand?" That's a rhetorical question, obviously, and the answer is: no one. You know, here is the truly amazing thing. Think about this. Even though the people alive at that time on this planet are convinced that there's a God. You won't meet a single atheist during the tribulation. They are convinced that there's a God and they're convinced that the world is enduring His judgment. They still will not turn to Him in repentance, pleading for His forgiveness and mercy. Instead, they will turn away from Him in fear and call for the mountains and the rocks to kill them, to cover them, and to shield them from Him. They want to run. They will harden their hearts further against God. Not only will they turn away from Him in fear, but eventually, as will see, their fear will turn into anger as this continues to unfold. They won't just be afraid of what's happening, they will be so angry with God. They will harden their hearts. And then God Himself will harden their hearts. 2 Thessalonians 2 talks about that, right? God will send them strong delusion so that they would believe the lie. This is really frightening stuff.

If you're here tonight and you're not a follower of Jesus Christ, let me just say to you that what we've just studied together - the catastrophic results of this seal - may seem to you to be surreal,

unbelievable because nothing like this has ever happened in your lifetime. Nothing like this has ever happened in recorded human history. But remember, the message of this Book is real and certain because back in chapter 1, verse 1, we're told it is the testimony of Jesus and it's going to happen. The message to you is this, and it's not an easy one for me to deliver, but this is the message. If you will not repent, Hebrews 10:31 says this, "it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God." If you continue in your rebellion, that's what you will face. I plead with you to turn from your sin and accept the grace offered to you in the gospel. There will be people living during the tribulation who do that, who respond to God's offer of grace in Christ, in His perfect life, His substitutionary death, and His resurrection. They will repent. They will believe in Christ. And many of them will even be martyred for their faith. Tonight, where you sit, you can turn from your sin in your heart and throw yourself on the mercy of God.

For us who are followers of Christ, what should our response to these seals be? Well, first of all, let's admit that these are hard things. We should take no more delight or joy in the destruction of the wicked than God Himself does. Yes, we look forward to justice being done on those who have perpetrated horrific crimes against others and against God. But we don't find joy in that. So, what should we do? First of all, we pray for the salvation of the people on this planet because, folks, this is not make believe. This is the testimony of Jesus Himself to us. This is what is coming. Pray for the people on this planet. Number two: long for justice if they refuse to repent, as God Himself does. It's okay to say, "God, how long before you pay back those who are murdering children by the millions every year on this planet?" It's okay. Number three: share the gospel, warning the people in our lives about the wrath to come and thank God every day that we who have believed in Christ will be rescued from the wrath to come. We will, instead, be enjoying, like the tribulation saints, rest and the joys of heaven - please hear me - not because we deserve it, but because Christ deserves it and we are permanently in Him because He is ours and we are His. We are safe forever. Think about it this way: people alive then will try to shield themselves from God's wrath in caves. We do it in the cleft of the Rock, in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Let's pray together.

Father, these are hard things to think about. Help us to respond to these things in faith. Help us to believe You and help us to live appropriately to what we're learning together. Lord, help us to love other people, to share the gospel, to urge them to get right with You, to be reconciled to You.

And Father, help us to be grateful every day for Your grace in Christ, that we are safe from the wrath to come because we are in Jesus Christ - inseparably, eternally united to Him as our representative and we get what He deserves and not what we deserve. Lord, we thank You. We praise You for the gospel. I pray for those who may be here tonight who are still in their sin. Lord, help them to see that it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. May they humble themselves and embrace the gospel even tonight. We pray in Jesus name. Amen.