



SILENCE IN JUDGMENT AMID SHOUTS OF MERCY **Revelation 6-7**

Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.

When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!"

When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed, 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben, 12,000 from the tribe of Gad, 12,000 from the tribe of Asher, 12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh, 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon, 12,000 from the tribe of Levi, 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar, 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

"Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 6-7)

If you have Bible, and I hope you do, turn with me to Revelation 6 where controversy really begins to come to the front in the book of Revelation. The interpretation of the opening chapters of this book is fairly unified. Chapter 1 is clearly a picture of Christ and the glory of the gospel. Chapters 2 and 3 as letters to the churches are clearly addressed to both believers then in the first century and believers today in the twenty-first century. Chapters 4 and 5 offer a glorious picture of God on His throne, and the Lion-like Lamb who has conquered sin and death and the grave and who has authority to open the scroll in the Father's right hand and to bring the kingdom of God to ultimate consummation in the world.

But when you get to Chapter 6 and the seals of this scroll begin to break, we begin to see major differences in the interpretation of both large and small details in this book. Take just the first 2 verses of Chapter 6 for an example. Verse 1 says, "*Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals...*" (Rev. 6:1). Now let's go ahead and stop there and realize that some commentators and Bible-believing, faithful preachers would say that by

this time, the church has been raptured, taken away into heaven, and Revelation 6 all the way to Revelation 19 is describing a specific period of Tribulation (usually described as seven years) that occurs between the taking up of the church into heaven and the beginning of a thousand-year millennial kingdom described in Revelation 20. We could pause at this point and have hours of debate over what this time is a reference to, and we're only about ten words into Revelation 6.

Then in verse 2, John says, "*And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow...*" (Rev. 6:2). So we stop there, and interpretations abound over who the rider on the white horse is. Some people believe this is Jesus, other people believe this is symbolic of the proclamation of the gospel among the nations, and then other people believe this is a picture of sin and conquest and warfare on the earth. The first commentary I read this week when I got to that point in my study said this rider was Jesus and made what I thought was a pretty persuasive case for that. But then the next commentary totally refuted that and made a case for another interpretation. So on and on I went, wrestling with different things in different commentaries, and then when I thought I'd come to a position, the last commentary I read offered an entirely different interpretation than all the others, and I just threw it up in the air, thinking, "I'm never going to get this!"

And there I was reminded that we must approach this book with a proper humility. This is key. The variety of interpretations of the book of Revelation should always drive us to humility, and at the same time, should never drive us to despair.

Let me explain what I mean. The difficulties in and disagreements about the book of Revelation should never drive us to despair. They should never drive us to think, "Ah, no one really knows all the answers here." Because that's not true.

God does know all the answers here, and the picture from this entire book (the Bible!) is absolutely clear: we know how this is going to end. Christ is going to come back for His people, and He is going to usher in the consummation of the kingdom of God where we will reign with Christ and enjoy the presence of God in a new heaven and a new earth forever and ever and ever. That we know, so there is no reason for despair. But there is reason for humility as we try to discern how kingdom consummation is going to come about.

Basic Reminders...

So a couple of basic reminders that I want to put before you again. We talked about some of these the first week in Revelation. (If you missed that sermon, I would encourage you to go back and listen to it because we established some important foundations there.)

Concerning the church...

A couple of basic reminders. First, concerning the church. We talked in the first week about how in the church, when it comes to the essentials of our faith, there must be unity. In essentials, unity. Meaning, being a part of the church necessitates believing in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, and the gospel of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, the necessity of belief in Christ for salvation, and so on. These are essentials that I (and I hope and trust, we) would die for. If you find yourself in a foreign government where you are told to deny these truths or die, you and I can take death every time as Christians because these truths are central to life—now and forever.

So in essentials, we have unity, yet in non-essentials, our goal, our focus, our value is liberty. There are many things, both theological and practical, that the Bible speaks to in different ways that are not essential, that are not at the same level as the essential truths that I just mentioned. So practical things like one's view of alcohol or a certain view of schooling, or theological things like one's view of Revelation or the millennium. These are not essential for unity in the body of Christ.

There is room for liberty, for freedom of different thoughts and convictions on these things, and we need to make sure to maintain that. It is good for us to have convictions, even strong convictions, about non-essential things, but we also need to realize that not every issue is of equal importance. So we approach Revelation humbly, knowing that in this room, different people will have different views on different things. And we leave room for that, leaving liberty for that—for good, healthy discussion of these things—but never for division over these things. I would go so far as to say that it would be sin for you and I to divide fellowship over a non-essential issue, whether it be alcohol or a particular view of schooling or a particular interpretation of Revelation or the end times.

Regarding Revelation...

So with that reminder concerning the church, I humbly move to a couple of reminders regarding Revelation, some of which you may even disagree with! As we approach Revelation 6 and 7 this morning, I want to help you begin to understand how Revelation seems to be organized.

Up to this point, we've already seen seven letters. Now today, we're seeing seven seals. Next week we're going to read about seven trumpets, and then we're going to read about seven bowls, and so on and so on through the end of book. It seems that these series of sevens are arranged in cycles more than they are arranged around chronology.

The arrangement of Revelation seems cyclical, not chronological, meaning that Revelation is not intended to be read as a day-by-day account of how the kingdom of God unfolds in the world with one thing happening after another chronologically. If you try to read Chapters 6-22 as a chronological order of events, it's going to get really confusing, and chapters 6-7 are a good example of this. Chapter 6 ends with total devastation across the earth in the sixth seal, and then when you start Chapter 7, we see a vision where everything is great on the earth. Then at the end of Chapter 7, we see a portrait of eternity in heaven for all believers in the consummation of the kingdom. But when we get to Chapter 8 next week, it's going to look like we're starting all over again with some of the stuff we saw in Chapter 6.

So think cycles that repeat and reinforce one another. Each cycle (whether it's the 7 seals or the 7 trumpets or the 7 bowls) describes similar themes and even similar events from different perspectives and in different ways.

And they all build on each other, so the visions in Revelation gradually build toward a climactic consummation. They don't just say the same thing over and over again. Instead, they build on one another as each one intensifies truths and themes that we've seen in the others, adding different details to emphasize different things as we get a comprehensive picture of the coming of God's kingdom in this world.

One writer said, "The unity of John's book ... is not chronological ... but artistic, like that of a musical theme with variations, each variation adding something new to the significance of the whole composition." Just imagine the progression of a symphony. It's repeating and

reinforcing but building and building and building toward a climax. So these visions, these themes, are going to build on one another as we progress along.

Now the big question that so much in Revelation revolves around is timing. And in a general way, we know that the timing of Revelation involves the last days. And this is the only point—probably the only point in this entire series—where I am going to give you a definite date concerning the end times because I am confident of the beginning date of the end times, or the last days. You may want to write this down, because this is a date that you want to mark on the calendar. I believe, after studying Revelation and its place in the entire New Testament, I believe that I can pinpoint the beginning of the last days within a couple of years.

Sometime around AD 30, when a crucified dead man named Jesus rose to life and walked out of a tomb. On that day, the last days began. As a result of his resurrection, the Spirit of God was poured out on the earth for the spread of the gospel of God to the nations, and God is asserting His rule and His reign during these days over all things in heaven and on earth through His church. But it's not the ultimate end.

We're in a weird period of redemptive history in which the kingdom of God has come in Christ, and He has conquered sin and death and Satan and the grave. The kingdom of God, in one sense, has come, but in another sense, it's still coming. And we're praying, "God, may Your kingdom come!" We know that one day, Jesus is going to come back and He's going to consummate His kingdom on the earth. The time we're in right now is referred to all over Scripture as the last days.

So Revelation is about these "last days" between the first and second comings of Christ. We all agree on that. What we disagree on is when what happens during these last days.

So the timing of Revelation involves the last days, and final reminder, the theme of Revelation is the gospel. I will be the first to admit that this theme is affecting the way I understand this book. I am convinced that from the first chapter to the last chapter, the theme of the book of Revelation is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and all of these visions are given by God to His church in the first century and to His church in the twenty-first century primarily to encourage and exhort and plead for them and us to persevere in the gospel.

I don't believe that the point of Revelation is to give us charts by which we can literally interpret contemporary events in world history. I believe John literally tells us in the beginning of this book that he is giving us symbols and visions that together bring the gospel to bear on struggling, suffering Christians in the first century and struggling, suffering Christians in the twenty-first century with the intent of enabling them and us to persevere in the gospel and proclaim the gospel with all of our hearts to the ends of the earth, no matter what it costs us.

You know, it's interesting (and we saw this back in May and June when we were studying Matthew), the disciples wanted to know when and where and what signs are going to accompany the coming of God's kingdom. They wanted charts and dates and locations. They wanted that in Matthew, and then, after Jesus rose from the grave, His disciples wanted the same thing in Acts.

"So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my

witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:6-8).

So fulfill your purpose in redemptive history. Rise up and take your place as men and women who spend your lives knowing and proclaiming this gospel. That was the point of the first portrait we see of the church in the New Testament (in the book of Acts), and that is the point of the last portrait we see of the church in the New Testament (in the book of Revelation). The point is not to give us dates and times; the point is to cause us to rise up and be faithful to this gospel, to patiently endure in this world, and to proclaim this gospel wherever we go and around the world until the day when the Lamb of God returns to receive the full reward of His sufferings.

Gospel Truths...

So with that, I want us to see gospel truths that are abundantly clear in what we just read in Revelation 6-7. Coming directly on the heels of the worth of God and Christ in Revelation 4-5, the Lamb begins to open the seals on the scroll, this scroll containing the history of redemption, God’s plans for the restoration of all things. And we see four crystal clear truths come to the surface.

God is ultimately sovereign over evil.

Number one, God is ultimately sovereign over evil. Just like we saw God at the center of the throne (at the center of everything) in Chapters 4-5, God is at the center of everything that happens in Chapter 6 and following. All of the seals are being opened, and all of these things are happening under the authority of God in Christ.

I want you to see the language here. Go to Chapter 6. I want you to underline every time you see some kind of authority or permission or allowance given by God in these chapters.

Look at Revelation 6:2, the first rider. *“And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him ...”* (Rev. 6:2). Then go to Verse 4. You have the second rider, bright red. *“And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth ...”* (Rev 6:4). Then you get down to Verse 8, the last rider on a horse. *“And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth ...”* (Rev. 6:8).

“They were given ...” So a crown was given. Permission was given. Authority was given. It begs the question, who’s giving it? God’s giving it. These riders have nothing in and of themselves. Everything they have, they’ve been given by God. The only authority they have, the only permission they have, they’ve been given by God.

It continues. Go to the next chapter, Chapter 7. *“Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power—here it is—to harm earth and sea ...”* Four angels were given power to harm earth and sea.

Next chapter, Chapter 8. Let’s go a little past where we’re reading tonight. I want you to see this. Revelation 8:2, *“Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and—here it is—seven trumpets were given to them”* (Rev. 8:2). Verse 3, *“And another angel came and*

stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints ..." (Rev. 8:3).

There's Chapter 8. Keep going to Chapter 9. Look at Verse 1. These seven trumpets are being blown. *"And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and—here it is—he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit"* (Rev. 9:1). He was given this key. He didn't have it before; it was given to him. Verse 3, *"Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth"* (Rev. 9:3). Verse 5, *"They were allowed to torment them for five months ..."* (Rev. 9:5). They were allowed to do this.

Let me show you one more chapter, Chapter 13. All over Chapter 13. We're going to see this in a few weeks, this beast rising out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads. Listen to this description. Verse 5, *"And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months"* (Rev. 13:5). Go down to Verse 7. *"Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation ..."* (Rev. 13:7)

It goes on in Chapter 13, the second beast. Listen to Verse 14, *"... And by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth ..."* (Rev. 13:14). Verse 15, *"And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast ..."* (Rev. 13:15).

Are you getting the point? God is sovereignly directing all of this, even the worst of this. It's clear in the book of Revelation. Satan and his demons in Revelation can do nothing apart from divine permission. He, they are on a leash. It's the same picture we've seen in the book of Job as Satan attacks and afflicts Job in various ways, but we know he is only doing those things under divine permission. Even amidst evil, Christ is in control of it all. These four horsemen in Chapter 6 are not out of control; they are in control, and ultimately they are bringing about the purposes of God.

Satan can do nothing apart from divine permission, and suffering is always used to fulfill divine purposes. Put yourself in the shoes of first century brothers and sisters wondering what was going on when Nero crucified scores of Christians after the fire of Rome in AD 64. They're wondering what is going on when cities are struck by earthquakes, when evil is abounding in the world and suffering is abounding in the church. It looks like it's chaotic, and it looks like it's out of control. These visions offer a vivid reminder that Christ is in control, and God is ultimately sovereign—even over evil.

See it in Revelation 6:10, where the saints who've been slain are around the altar of God and they know God is sovereign. What's the first thing we hear them crying? *"O Sovereign Lord, holy and true"* (Rev. 6:10) Yes!

The title they use for God there is "Despotes," from which we get "despot" meaning one with ultimate rule and authority. It's the same title that the saints in Acts 4 used when they first began to experience persecution in the church. It's the cry of saints who have experienced suffering in this world of all kinds throughout all history, and it's the cry of saints in this room who are walking through difficult times. Look up to heaven and see the "despot," the "Sovereign Lord" amidst the chaos. We trust and we believe that He is in control, and He is working all these things together—even the worst things together—*"for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose"* (Rom. 8:28). God is ultimately sovereign over even evil and Satan and suffering.

Men and women are morally responsible for evil.

At the same time, the second truth we see here in Revelation 6-7, men and women are morally responsible for evil. So from one horse to the next in Chapter 6, we see evil and sin spiraling on the earth. In colors of white and red and black and pale green, images of four horsemen that remind us of depictions of sin and war in Zechariah 1 and 6. In these images, we see the sinfulness of man on display.

One writer said, "In these four interconnected seals ... [we see] human depravity running its course" upon the earth. From the desire to conquer one another to civil war with one another, resulting in injustice and famine and death, we see the sins of men and women coming full circle.

See the deafening truth here: men and women are decidedly sinful. From one horse to the next, we see a progression of sin and strife. We see a portrait of Romans 1: God giving men and women over to their sinfulness, ultimately symbolized in their slaying one another. See it.

Men and women are decidedly sinful, and men and women are dangerously self-destructive. See the effects of sin here! To every man and woman within the sound of my voice who has a tendency to rationalize sin, justify sin, minimize sin: see the horror of sin!

This imagery is so important. After all, Satan doesn't tempt you and me with images of riders on dark horses leading us away to death. No! Satan masquerades as an angel of light, and he tempts you and me with enticing pictures of sin and pleasure. Don't believe it! Revelation 6 says, "Sin destroys." Sin destroys you. Sin destroys others. Even so-called little sins have devastating effects. Sin destroys, devastates, and ultimately damns.

The rider on the fourth horse makes clear that men and women deserve death. This image of a quarter of the human race wiped out at once. (That number will become more significant as we progress, but don't miss the overall point.) Robert Mounce said:

"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."

In our quest to discover the meaning of precise details, let us not miss the point. Sin is all around us, tempting us, luring us, attempting to lead us. And it is devastating in its effects—destructive and ultimately deadly. It is a frightening thing for God to give men and women over to their sinfulness. Such sinfulness leads to conflict and war and strife and injustice and poverty and disease and ultimately death. All of these things flow from the sinfulness of man.

God will judge men and women who turn from Him and live for this world.

Which leads us to the third truth: God will judge men and women who turn from Him and live for this world. These seals ultimately depict the justice and judgment of God upon a sinful world, upon sinners who turn from Him and live for this world. I use that terminology very intentionally.

In Revelation 6:10 (look at this with me) the saints under the altar of God cry out, "O Sovereign Lord ... how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" You might underline that phrase "those who dwell on the earth" because it's a phrase that we see (and are going to see more) used all throughout Revelation to describe non-Christians who worship idols and rebel against God, people who live for this world and worship the idols of this world instead of worshiping God and living for another world. So unbelievers are described as "those who dwell on the earth," those who turn from God and live for this world.

And they are under the judgment of God, a reality that is particularly evident in the opening of the sixth seal. Revelation 6:12 says,

"When [the Lamb] opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place" (Rev. 6:12-14).

Those verses are loaded with Old Testament prophetic pronouncements (and New Testament, for that matter) of God's wrath that is coming upon sinners. Isaiah 13, Isaiah 24, Isaiah 34, Ezekiel 32, Joel 2, Habakkuk 3, Matthew 24, Mark 13. This same scene—this earthquake—we'll see repeated again after the sixth trumpet in Revelation 11 and the seventh bowl in Revelation 16.

We may not know exactly when these things will happen, but we do know this: God will judge men and women who turn from Him and live for this world. The scope of His judgment will be cosmic.

William Hendriksen writes:

"Try to visualize what John saw, taking the picture as a whole: heaven itself curling up like a piece of paper, rolling up like a scroll; the sun, its light blotted out so that it resembles a black sack used in mourning; the big, full moon, a huge, awe-inspiring bloody ball; the stars, turned out of their orbits and plunging to the earth in great showers; the earth itself quaking violently so that every house crashes to the ground; and every mountain and island suddenly disappearing. What a picture of dread and despair, of confusion and consternation—for the wicked!"

And it makes sense. Romans 1 described the essence of sin in man as worshiping creation rather than the Creator, so here, the Creator takes all of creation—the sun and moon and stars and skies and everything underneath them—and He obliterates it all. Nothing in creation is worthy of worship. The idolatrous earthly securities of earth-dwellers will one day be utterly destroyed.

The scope of His judgment will be cosmic, and the breadth of His judgment will be universal. Verse 15 gives a list of every type of person—kings and great ones and generals and rich and powerful and slave and free. They will all, without exception, hide themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. The shaking of the heavens will strip away all their social distinctions as the judgment of God equalizes all of mankind. Everyone, from kings and presidents to kids and the poor, all equally cowering before the presence of God the judge.

And cowering is the right word, for the effect of God's judgment will be terrifying. Everyone, the Bible pictures, is hiding from the face of God and from the wrath of Christ. Yes, the wrath of Christ the Lamb. Don't miss this.

You don't want to meet God face-to-face apart from saving faith in Christ. You will long to escape his presence. Revelation 6 pictures the people crying out for rocks and mountains to crush them, for that would be better than facing the wrath of God in sin. Some people think, "Well, hell's not that bad a place to be. After all, if all these people who have lived it up in the world are going to be there, it might be kind of fun." Don't be fooled! The effect of God's judgment will be terrifying.

And the duration of His judgment will be eternal. I want to jump ahead here in the narrative to Revelation 8:1, where the seventh seal is opened, and there is silence in heaven. Many scholars debate what that silence signifies, but it seems clear from all of Scripture that the severity of God's judgment always evokes silence among men. What do you say to the sight of the earth evaporating and men and women calling out for rocks and mountains to crush them?

We'll talk more next week about how this silence is tied with the prayers of the saints in Chapter 8, but surely part of the point is simply to cause us to sit back as John did and soak in this awe-inspiring, horror-inducing reality. God will judge men and women all over this room, all over this city, all over this country, and all over the universe who turn from Him and live for this world.

His judgment will be cosmic, universal, terrifying, and eternal. And when that day comes, the door of God's grace will be forever closed to everyone who has turned from Him. All men and women will come face-to-face on that day before God's wrath. "*Who can stand?*" Revelation 6 closes by asking. "*Who can stand before this God?*" And Revelation 7 beautifully answers that question.

God will save men and women who trust in Him and live for another world.

Final gospel truth, God will save men and women who trust in Him and live for another world. We see two pictures of the people of God in Revelation 7: one a throng of 144,000 people representing the twelve tribes of Israel, and the other a multitude that no one can count from every nation, tribe, people, and language.

And, not surprisingly, there's quite a bit of debate over who is included in these groups. Certainly they both describe the people of God, but this first group ... Is it literally 144,000 Israelites? Is it representative of all ethnic Israelites who will be saved before the second coming of Christ? Is it a figurative representative of all the people of God, Jews and Gentiles alike?

And then the second group ... Is it a picture of martyrs, who like the group from Revelation 6, are clothed in white robes because they were slain for their testimony? Or is it a picture of all of God's people, finally and ultimately joined together in heaven at the consummation of God's kingdom?

Again, we just don't have time to exhaust all the options and explore the strengths and weaknesses of each, but I am persuaded that these two pictures are of the same people from different perspectives at different times.

Start with the time. We learn here in Revelation 7:1 that John saw four angels at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth (which, based on Zechariah, is

likely a reference to the four horsemen we just saw described at the beginning of Chapter 6). Another angel calls to them and says in verse 3, *"Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads"* (Rev. 7:3). The picture takes us back to before the seals were opened, before the earth was shaken and destroyed. And so this picture depicts God, before sending His devastating judgments on the earth, marking His people to protect them amidst the tribulation He was about to bring.

Follow in your notes. Revelation 7:1-8 is showing us that Christians are secure on earth in the midst of tribulation. "The servants of God" (verse 3), a term that is always used in Revelation to describe all redeemed believers, are figuratively represented here with a complete number—144,000. This is a number we'll see again in Chapter 14 to describe God's people. Then in the new Jerusalem in Chapters 21-22, we'll see that the city has twelve gates, which are twelve pearls, on which are written the names of the twelve tribes, and the city has a wall 144 cubes in height with 12 foundation stones on which are written the names of the 12 apostles.

This is not part of the church or a section of the church or an ethnic group among the church. Nowhere else in Revelation is there ever a mention of Jewish believers apart from Gentile believers. This is the church, described like an army, preparing to go into battle amidst suffering and tribulation in the world (what was prophesied in places like Daniel 12), and God says, "I have secured them for this battle."

Now that doesn't mean the battle is easy. Follow this in your notes. We've already seen in Chapter 6 that God plans the persecution of His people. Do you want to put something on your date chart for determining when Jesus is going to come back? Revelation 6:11 says to wait until the last saint is martyred for the gospel, and then Jesus will return. And realize, that may be you. So lay aside the chart and lay down your life proclaiming Christ to the ends of the earth.

This is clear: God is telling His children in the first century and His children in the twenty-first century that they will suffer as they witness. It is in God's foreordained plans for the future for His people to be slain for the Word of the God, for His people to suffer as they proclaim Christ to the world.

Jesus said the same thing. We studied it in Matthew 24:9 *"They will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake...And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come"* (Matt. 24:9, 14). These are words from Jesus and John that in the coming days would strengthen the church as hundreds of Christians were fed to animals, crucified, and burned alive due to Roman persecution. And these are words from Jesus and John that strengthen the church around the world today where persecution for gospel proclamation is an ever-present reality.

You say, "Well, how is that security for God's people, if they're being fed to animals and crucified and burned and killed?" Here's how. God plans the persecution of His people (they will suffer as they witness), and God promises protection for His people. They are safe from God's wrath. They are ultimately secure.

This is the same thing here in Revelation 6-7 that Jesus tells His disciples in Matthew 10. Don't fear the people of this world who only have power to destroy the body. Fear the God over this world who has power to destroy the soul. You may suffer and die as a witness, but you will be safe from God's wrath forever.

Slain saints clothed in a white robe in Revelation 6:11—a white robe that reappears in Revelation 7:14 (which we'll talk about in a minute) as a picture of identification with the Christ who has conquered sin by suffering on our behalf. Jesus has taken the wrath due the sinner upon Himself by dying on a cross. He has endured our punishment. He has paid the eternal price for our sins. So that all who trust in Him and all who proclaim Him are absolutely secure. Even in a world where it is dangerous to follow and preach Christ, you are absolutely, ultimately secure. No matter what happens to you in this world, you are safe from God's wrath forever in the world to come.

So with that confidence, God empowers perseverance in His people. This is the picture that the first half of Revelation 7 is intended to evoke. Through this vision, God is telling His people that they are sealed by His Word. God has marked them as His. A seal was a picture of ownership and belonging and security and protection.

To struggling saints in the first century and struggling saints in the twenty-first century, realize this: Before you ever began to walk through trial and tribulation, before the very foundation of this world of sin and evil and suffering, God sealed you as His child. And as a result of His seal on your soul, Satan cannot overcome you. Suffering cannot destroy you. Death cannot stop you. You belong to God in Christ, and He will keep you to the end. So trust in Him. Realize who you are in Him. Christians are secure on earth in the midst of tribulation.

Do you remember how Revelation 6 ended? Who can stand face-to-face before this holy God in His wrath? Who? Look at Revelation 7:9-10:

"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"

Christians are secure on earth in the midst of tribulation, and Christians will stand in heaven at the end of tribulation. All those who turn from sin and themselves and trust in Christ as Savior and Lord, as the Lion-like Lamb who was slain for our souls will one day stand before Him in victory! *"Having come through tribulation,"* verse 14. Some believe this is a reference to a particular time period, but every other time this word has been used to this point in Revelation, it has referenced the suffering and trials and affliction that saints walk through in this world. The picture is that—by the grace of God—they have endured.

So now, timewise in verse 9 things shift from before the judgments of Chapter 6 to after the judgments of Chapter 6. I don't want to lose you here. Follow with me. Chapter 7 is giving us a pause in between the sixth and seventh seals, and in this pause, we're seeing the tribulation of Chapter 6 from the perspective of God's people. God's going to judge the wicked, but where are the saints in the middle of all this? Chapter 7 answers that question. The first 8 verses show us God's people sealed before that tribulation even comes about. And then the last 9 verses (Revelation 7:9-17) show us God's people after that tribulation, after they've come through it.

Now you may wonder, "Why are God's people described as 144,000 from Israel in the first half of Chapter 7 and then a multitude that no one can count from every nation in the last half of Chapter 7? The answer to that question takes us all the way back to Chapter 5 where we saw Jesus described in two ways. Do you remember?

First, he was the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the promised Messiah of the people of Israel. So here, in the first half of Chapter 7, we see the people of God described as the complete descendants of the tribes of Israel, originating from which tribe? The first tribe mentioned, verse 5, is the tribe of Judah. Then, back in Chapter 5, we saw Jesus described as the Lamb who ransomed men and women from every nation, tribe, language, and people. So now, here in the last half of Chapter 7, the people of God are described as a multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, giving praise to the Lamb.

So let me summarize. In the first half of Chapter 7, God's people from the Lion of the tribe of Judah are sealed and secured by God before tribulation. In the last half of Chapter 7, God's people from the Lamb over every nation are now standing in heaven at the end of tribulation.

And there, the Bible says, standing in God's presence they will shout God's victory. "*Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!*" (Rev. 7:10). The angels fall on their faces and Amen the saints and then they cry, "*Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!*" (Rev. 7:12).

All who trust in the sacrifice of Christ on a cross, all who believe in the blood of the Lamb who died and rose again for you, will shout God's victory. They will serve in God's presence. Day and night before His throne. They will soak in God's glory. Listen to the last part of verse 15, "*He who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence*" (Rev. 7:15). Literally spread his presence, or his glory, over them.

Oh, what a contrast from the end of Chapter 6! People there were cowering before the wrath of God in their sin. Now, for all who have trusted in Christ, they are enjoying the wonder of God through their Savior.

They will be satisfied by His goodness. They shall neither hunger nor thirst anymore, for (get this imagery!) the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd. How can the Lamb be a shepherd? The Lamb will lead them to springs of living water.

Their souls will be totally satisfied by God's goodness, and they will be soothed by God's mercy. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Weep no more, brothers and sisters! Sin will be gone! Sadness will be gone! Sorrow will be no more! Nothing but satisfaction and joy and peace in the presence of God.

Practical Takeaways...

Repent of sin with urgency.

This text is not intended to cause each of us to debate over this or that. This text is intended to beckon all of us to repent of sin with urgency. Non-Christian, turn from sin and trust in Christ today! Be saved from sin today!

Jesus has come. He has died on the cross for your sin. He has taken the payment you were due. He has risen from the grave in victory over sin, so that when who turn from sin and trust in Him, you will be safe from God's wrath and secure as God's child forever and ever. Don't wait any longer. Don't waste any more time. The judgment of God is coming; do not be caught off guard. Teenager, college student, single adult, husband, wife, mom, dad, senior adult, repent of sin with urgency.

And, Christian, stop toying with sin today. It devastates and destroys. Every sin that you are holding onto at this moment is absolutely and utterly destructive, so by the power of Christ in you, repent today. Practical takeaway number one, repent of sin with urgency.

Proclaim the gospel with urgency.

Practical takeaway number two, proclaim the gospel with urgency. Christian brothers and sisters, you and I know that the judgment of God is coming and we know that the judgment of God is cosmic, universal, terrifying, and eternal, so let's warn the people around us. Let's warn them of coming wrath and tell them of Christ's mercy. Let us not sit silently by while people around us—while peoples around the world—drift into an eternal hell.

I'm going to a particular state in India this week to one of the most impoverished, most unreached places in the world. This state is less than 0.1% Christian, and due to poverty, the state's death rate is approximately 5,000 people per day. You put that together, and the reality in this state is that every single day, approximately 4,950 people are plunging into hell. We must go with urgency! To India, to Birmingham, right here.

Who do you need to share this news with this week here? You say, "Well, it's just not that easy to share with them." No, it's not. And it won't be, Revelation tells us. It won't ever be. But don't let fear keep you from giving your life as a witness to the Word of God. That's the point of this book!

Humbly cry out for God's justice amidst persecution.

As you face opposition in various forms, humbly cry out for God's justice amidst persecution. This is what we see the saints doing in Chapter 6, and it's a picture of God's people calling out for God's holiness and justice to be made known. For things in the world to be made right according to the righteousness of God.

Confidently cry out for God's mercy amidst suffering.

As you witness, here and around the world, humbly cry out for God's justice amidst persecution, and then confidently cry out for God's mercy amidst suffering in its various forms.

I was talking with a brother this last week whose wife has walked through severe depression. He described how his wife has suffered: emotionally not wanting to go on, physically needing help to get dressed in the morning. He described how on some mornings, she would literally fall out of bed and crawl across the floor to a table where her Bible sat, and she would grasp God's Word and cry out to God for His mercy. If that's what it takes, then do it, and know that He is there.

Christian, He is with you. He has sealed your soul in Him, and He will enable you to endure. He will enable you to stand. Confidently cry out for God's mercy amidst suffering.

Build your life and your family on that which lasts forever.

Fifth takeaway, build your life and your family on that which lasts forever. Let Revelation 6-7 beckon you today not to waste your life on the things of this world. One day, all of this is going to collapse on itself. It's going to be gone! Your house and your car and your clothes and all the stuff. It's going to burn up and you are going to stand before God with nothing. Be prepared for that day. Build your life on a foundation that will stand on that day.

And build your family on what will last forever. Parents, prepare your kids for Revelation 6. If you spend all your time getting them to school and teaching them instruments and coaching them in sports, spending hours and hours and hours in this or that or on the

football or baseball field or basketball court or whatever it is ... If you do all of these things but you do not spend hours and hours and hours teaching them the Word of God and teaching them to fear the wrath of God and teaching them about the love of God in Christ, then you will waste their lives. Because the day will come when all their achievements in this world are going to burn up, and what will you have left them with?

Build your life and your family on that which lasts forever—on Christ and His Word and His truth. Teach them to love Christ and to proclaim Christ, and model what that looks like in this world.

Spend and sacrifice your resources on that which brings eternal reward.

Sixth takeaway, spend and sacrifice your resources on that which brings eternal reward. How much of your bank account is devoted to things which bring eternal reward? How much of your schedule is devoted to things which bring eternal reward? Don't be fooled by college football this fall. None of it ultimately matters at all! Spend your time, sacrifice your money for the sake of what will last forever.

Always remember that this world is not our home.

And brothers and sisters in comfortable metro Birmingham, Alabama, always remember that this world is not our home. Our home is in heaven, and we await a Savior who will bring us there.

* NOTE: A list of additional resources to assist you in further study of the book of Revelation and eschatology are available as a PDF download at Radical.net/Revelation. Click on the "Materials" button under any message in the series for this and other weekly resources.

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