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Revelation 6.1-8.5

I. Introduction:

- A. Is it correct that Katrina, the floods in Iowa, and the tsunami are judgments of God?
- B. Is it correct to say that the wars on the earth are the judgments of God?
- C. Are Christians ever punished for sin?
- D. If Christians cannot ever receive punishment for sin (Rom. 8:1), then how is it that they endure judgments from God?

II. **Proposition**: Because we know that Christ controls all things (even pain and suffering), we must persevere through trials with the confidence that God will provide us with the faith to endure to the end because Christ the judge has redeemed us.

III. **Organizational Sentence**: Today's text has five sections dealing with the 7 seals. We will look at seals 1-4, then 5, then 6, and then an interlude concerning seal 6, and finally the 7th seal.

A. Context:

- 1. Last week, we saw a vision of heaven where God was seated on the throne in heaven receiving the worship that is due him. We saw that he is glorious but distant, separate from us, mediated to John by the Holy Spirit, elders, living creatures, a chaotic sea, and thunder and lightning.
- 2. We also saw a picture of Christ as his ascension to the throne where the Father, the Ancient of Days, handed over all authority in heaven and on earth to him because he is the victorious warrior, the Lion of Judah, who is also the Lamb who was slain to purchase God's people with his blood.
- 3. We remember that those chapters called us to worship Christ who is seated on the throne above all thrones with all authority to carry out the plans of 'the Last Days.' This scene is connected to Daniel 7. The two scenes are practically identical, but in John's vision, we see that the Son of Man is Christ. We also see in John's vision that at Christ's ascension to heaven, we entered into the last days. Daniel was told to write up his visions of the last days in a scroll, and now in chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation, we see that he is about to open that scroll and execute its contents.
- 4. Today's passage, Revelation 6.1-8.5 shows the opening of that scroll by Christ. It is important to remember that this vision, again, is not chronological. That is, we must not assume that what takes place in our text occurs progressively. All of the seals together represent the contents of the scroll. Each seal represents a different element of the last day judgments of the king.
- 5. This non-sequential reading goes against Dispensationalism. Since Dispensationalists believe chapters 4-22 all describe future events, they believe last week's text, ch. 4-5, and this week's passage, 6-8.5, all describe the 7 year tribulation which occurs after Christ raptures the church. This means that if you are a Christian today, nothing in

- the book of Revelation relates to you at all. They think that everything described from here on out pretty much only deals with people who trust in Christ after Christians are raptured but before the millennium. This means, most of the 'saints' described in the following passages are Jewish converts, though many will be Gentile converts.
6. Just to be clear, we understand the book of Revelation differently. We believe that Christians will not be raptured out of this world during the great tribulation. We believe that we are in the tribulation and that what is described here today deals with the entire church age (though we acknowledge that the period right before Christ's return might be characterized by these types of events in an especially dramatic way). This also means that we see the seals which are opened dealing with past, present, and future events. This vision is not sequential in terms of time, but thematic in its structure. Each of these seals describes the whole church age. They are parallel images that highlight a different element of these last days.

IV. The 1st-4th Seal: Christ controls all things, even war, famine, and death. (6.1-8)

- A. The first four seals go together in that they share a common background. It appears that John is mainly using imagery from Zech. 6:1-8, but he also has some allusions to Ez. 14:12-23 and Lev. 26. There is also a connection to Jesus' words in Matt. 24 and Lk. 21.
- B. The four seals show the instruments which Christ uses to judge those who oppose his kingdom and oppress his people. These judgments are universal in scope. From its OT background, we see that these riders punish those who are wicked and opposed to God. But, we also see that the righteous suffer along with the wicked, but for them, it is an instrument of God to test their faith and build proven character. That Christians will suffer during these seals is evident from the prayers of the martyrs in verses 9-11.

^{ESV} **Revelation 6:1** 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!" ² 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.

- C. Christ opens the first seal of the scroll, and as He does so, he speaks through the living creature before his throne. His authority is carried out by the living creature who then commands these riders to come forth.
 1. This shows us the absolute sovereignty of Christ. He is in control of everything, even the wars of conquest that occur.
 2. This is consistent with the Old Testament prophets who speak of God raising up nations and bringing them down. The free actions of the Babylonians and the Assyrians are brought about by God.
 3. So to here, even though these riders are evil, and have even been identified with the antichrist by some, they are ultimately under the sovereign control of Christ on the throne.
- D. This horse is white and its rider wears a crown. Many have associated him with the antichrist because of the similarity of this picture to Revelation where we see explicitly that the rider is Christ.
 1. This rider however, is not Christ, but resembles him. He rides a white horse, but he carries a bow and not a sword. He comes conquering just as Christ will finally come conquering.
 2. The point seems to be that he is a false Christ. He brings conquest. Whether it is for good or evil is not clear. Some make connections to Christ's sermon on the Mount of

Olivet in Matthew 24 where he says that many will come in his name and lead others astray. They say this rider will bring false peace, largely because the next rider takes away peace from the earth.

3. But, it seems that this rider simply represents the idea of conquest and oppression.

When we take this rider with others, we get a better picture. Since these riders don't follow chronologically, they all highlight different themes occurring concurrently.

³ When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" ⁴ And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

- E. The red horse takes away peace from the world. This is another picture of war, chaos, and oppression.

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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!"

- F. The third rider is on a black horse and carries scales in his hand.

1. Scales were used to weigh out portions of food in the market. Here, the rider gives the price of a quart of wheat. That was enough food for one day.
2. A denarius was one day's wage. So, this is an economic crisis, a famine. A whole day's labor only brought you enough for one day's food.
3. However, the judgment is limited since oil and wine are not affected by the famine.

- G. Famine is a natural result of warfare. When nations rise to kill one another, there is often a famine with respect to food and other important goods. The point of this rider is that he brings a severe judgment, but it is limited and restrained to some degree.

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

- H. This last rider summarizes the other riders. He stands for death. Christ is said to hold the power of death and Hades in 1:18, and now we see him bring death upon the earth.

- I. The fact that this rider was given authority over $\frac{1}{4}$ of the earth does not mean that this rider refers to a specific event where this will literally happen. It is more likely that this shows the limited nature of the judgment, just like the last rider.

1. The point is that these judgments will be bad, but they will not be as bad as they could be.
2. Death comes as a result of warfare, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts.

- J. The point of these riders from the first four seals is that Christ is in total control over all the bad things that happen. These bad things, war, famine, and death, are judgments of Christ upon a rebellious humanity. These judgments are punishment for opposing his kingdom. But, for believers who suffer through this time at the hands of the wicked who carry out warfare, this suffering is purifying testing that contributes to our sanctification. Christ is in control of all things.

V. **The 5th Seal:** Christians will suffer, even unto death, until Christ returns. (6.9-11)

Revelation 6:9-11 ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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?" ¹¹ 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.

- A. The next seal shows us a vision of heaven. It moves from an earthly perspective to a heavenly one. In heaven, John sees the souls of those who died during the first four seals.
 - 1. They are in heaven, not glorified in resurrection bodies, but as souls before the throne of God symbolized by the alter.
 - 2. The alter has two implications. First, it stands for the throne of God. This is common in the OT and in the book of Revelation. Second, it has sacrificial overtones, implying that the saints in heaven under the alter have been slain as a living sacrifice to Christ.
 - 3. Taken together, the saints are before God's throne, under his protection, but martyred saints who have shed their blood like Christ for the sake of God's kingdom.
- B. These martyrs cry out for vengeance and vindication. They pray that Christ would avenge their blood. But, instead of Christ coming immediately to judge, they are comforted and given rest for a while longer. They must wait until the full number of martyrs has shed his blood.
- C. It is important that we understand the significance of these martyrs. Who are they?
 - 1. Dispensationalists argue that these are people who live during the tribulation after the rapture who die for their faith.
 - 2. However, since this describes the church age, and since Jesus talks about all Christians suffering for the gospel, it seems more likely that these martyrs stand for all Christians who die and are awaiting the resurrection from heaven.
 - 3. The vision does not imply that each one of these are actual martyrs, but that the host has suffered through these judgments on non-believers, war, famine, and death.
- D. The point is, Christians will suffer and die as they await the return of Christ in judgment. Just as the gospel must go forth to all the nations before Christ returns, so too, the fullness of the elect must come to know Christ and suffer and die before he will return in answer to the prayers of the saints.

VI. The 6th Seal: Christ will judge and even the most powerful will not stand. (6.12-17)

- A. This seal focuses on the final climactic end to the church age at the return of Christ. It contains numerous elements of descriptions of the Day of the Lord in the OT.

Revelation 6:12-17 ¹² 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, ¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴ The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ 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, ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

- B. For the Old Testament background on this imagery, see primarily Is. 34.4. But, also see, Joel 2, Is. 13.10-13, Ez. 32.6-8, Hab. 3, Amos 8.8-9, and Jer. 4.23-28. Jesus uses the same imagery in Matt. 24. Compare the two.
- C. It is clear that this seal highlights the very end rather than events throughout the church age because of the direct appeal to these OT passages.
- D. What this means is that this seal is a response to the prayers of the martyrs. This seal is intended to show that they will finally be vindicated. Yes, they suffered for a while, but this is the end. No one can hide from the scope and severity of this judgment, not Caesar, not anybody. While the first four seals were restrained and not total, this judgment is total, causing many to ask, 'who can stand?'

V. **An Interlude:** Christ has sealed us for salvation. (7.1-17)

- A. Chapter 7 is an interlude. John watches Christ open the first 6 seals, but then another vision interrupts this vision in order to show John the answer to the question, ‘who can stand the final judgment?’
- B. This chapter has two sections, which again give us two perspectives on the situation. 7.1-8 explains how saints will persevere through the suffering of the seals mentioned above: they are sealed. 7.9-17 reveals the heavenly reward for those who do persevere. The two perspective together show us that Christians are able to stand in the judgment because they have been sealed by God.

^{ESV} **Revelation 7:1** 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. ² 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, ³ saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." ⁴ And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: ⁵ 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed, 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben, 12,000 from the tribe of Gad, ⁶ 12,000 from the tribe of Asher, 12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh, ⁷ 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon, 12,000 from the tribe of Levi, 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar, ⁸ 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

- C. There is a pause in the judgments, not a literal pause, but a pause for our sake as we wait for our answer to the question. In fact, it appears that we have backed up to the beginning of the church age since the angel says that the saints are not to be harmed until they are sealed.
- D. What is this seal on the forehead?
 - 1. Dispensationalists argue that it is a literal mark on the forehead that tribulation saints will have. Tim LaHaye says this seal is a visible mark so that everyone will either have a mark of the beast, discussed later in Revelation, or a mark of Christ. This way, it will be easy to identify who is a saint and who is not. The implication is that this mark is final and once you have made your decision, it can never be changed.¹
 - 2. In reality, this seal has nothing to do with a smudge on your head. If you know your New Testament, you are familiar with the expression, ‘sealed with the Holy Spirit’ found in Ephesians 1:13 which describes the aspect of our inheritance as Christians which guarantees that we belong to God.
 - a. In the ancient world, slaves were marked on their foreheads to identify who they belonged to.
 - b. In chapter 14, John sees this sealed group again, and what is on their forehead is the name of God and Christ (14.1).
 - c. This isn’t implying a physical mark, but that these people have been sealed and claimed by Christ. They are his. He has sealed them as a guarantee that they belong to him. Thus, they cannot fall during the suffering of the church age.
 - 3. This seal of the living God is in contrast to the ‘mark of the beast’ which does not guarantee anything positive for those who do not belong to God. The fact that the name of God is ‘on their forehead,’ identifies these as God’s covenant community. This seal not only identifies, but it is a promise that God will ensure their perseverance.
- E. The number sealed by Christ is 144,000. Is this a literal number? If so, since this describes the whole church age, then there are only 144,000 saints throughout history.

¹ LaHaye, Tim. Revelation: Illustrated and Made Plain. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, pg. 111-112.

1. Like almost all the other numbers in Revelation, this is a figurative number that stands for the fullness of God's people. $144,000 = 12^2 \times 1,000$. There are 12 tribes of Israel and 12 apostles. 1,000 stands for a great multitude. It is as if the number means, God's people number Israel times the church times a great multitude.
 2. The real issue here is the listing of the tribes. Dispensationalist John Walvoord argues that the list shows that 12,000 from each tribe will be delivered from the tribulation, but most likely more liked will be saved.²
 3. There are numerous problems with the literal interpretation of this number and the tribes given.
 - a. First, not all the tribes are listed. Dan is omitted as well as Ephraim.
 - b. Second, Manasseh is added to the list as well as Levi.
 - c. Third, the order of the list given is different than any other ordering in Scripture.
 4. It seems that this list means something else, but what?
 - a. Notice that Judah is listed first, which is unusual since he was the 4th child of Jacob. But, Judah is Christ's line, and so it has been moved to the front.
 - b. Notice that the children of Jacob's slave women are moved from the bottom of the list given in several OT passages to positions 3-6. This indicates that the outsiders, Gentile slaves, have been promoted and included in the most prominent positions in the list.
 - c. Dan is omitted from the list. In Israel's history, Dan became know for leading Israel's northern kingdom into idolatrous apostasy.
 - d. "Thus the order of the tribes in Revelation 7 symbolizes the reign of Jesus, from the tribe of Judah; the incorporation of outcasts; and the exclusion of idolaters from the covenant community that God shields from his terrible wrath."³
- F. So the first 8 verses show that Christians are sealed by Christ and will be empowered to remain faithful to Christ during the suffering of the church age.
1. A precise number is given to represent the fact that God knows exactly who are his.
 2. The number 144,000 is given to show the fullness and completeness of this group.
 3. The number is associated with the tribes of Israel to represent the remnant of Israel theme of Old Testament eschatology.

Revelation 7:9-17 ⁹ 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, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹ 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, ¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." ¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ "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. ¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷ 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."

- G. This second section gives us the picture of the heavenly reward for persevering in faith during the tribulation of the church age. It gives us a different perspective on the same group of people.

² Walvoord, John. The Revelation of Jesus Christ. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, pg. 143.

³ Johnson, Dennis. Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation. Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, pg.132.

- H. A great multitude is revealed.
 - 1. This multitude is numerous.
 - 2. This multitude is multi-ethnic and multi-lingual.
 - 3. This multitude is under God's authority under the throne.
 - 4. This multitude is redeemed, thus the pure white robes.
 - 5. This multitude is grateful and passionately worshipping God and Christ the Lamb (notice the palm branches that remind us of Christ's triumphal entry as king).
- I. The elders and living creatures join in the worship of the redeemed.
- J. One of the elders (functioning as an interpreter again and remaining distinct from the redeemed pictured here) asks John who if he knows who the multitude is. John does not, and so the elder explains.
 - 1. They are those from the great tribulation.
 - 2. They are those who are washed by the blood of the Lamb.
 - 3. They are in heaven before God's throne.
 - 4. They shall never weep, hunger, thirst, die, or labor and toil in the heat.
 - 5. The Lamb is their shepherd.
 - 6. They have living water.
- K. But, what is the 'Great Tribulation'?
 - 1. Dispensationalists argue that this shows that we are dealing with those who live in the special 7 year tribulation period after the rapture. Thus, they identify this group with those who die during the 7 year great tribulation.⁴
 - a. They argue that the elders represent the church (from chapter 4-5) and thus this multitude is distinct from the church, concluding that the multitude comes from the 7 year tribulation period.
 - b. They also argue that the term 'great' tribulation distinguishes this time period from the tribulation that characterizes the whole church age.
 - 2. However, there is no reason to think that the Great Tribulation is nothing more than the tribulation of the church age itself.
 - a. Daniel 12:1 speaks of the great tribulation, which as we have already seen, refers to the time when the events of the scroll will occur by the sovereign power of the Son of Man.
 - b. The elders do not represent the church but are angels who bear some authority to watch over the church. Thus, there are no other saints in heaven than the great multitude from every nation, tribe, and tongue.
- L. The point of this second part of the chapter is to show that this same group of people that is sealed by Christ to withstand the judgment of the church age as well as the final judgment is also the group of people that will be rewarded in heaven with peace, harmony, prosperity, and joy.

VI. The 7th Seal: Christ will vindicate Christians by judging the earth as a response to their prayers. (8.1-5)

- A. Then we return to the previous vision where Christ is opening the seals. We are now on the final seal, and this time, when it is opened, there is no voice, no earthquake, no prayers of the saints, but silence.
 - 1. This silence represents anticipation. It is the calm before the storm.

⁴ Walvoord, John. The Revelation of Jesus Christ. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, pg. 144-145.

2. The seventh seal resonates with the 6th in that it contains prayers of the saints for vindication, and it contains aspects of final judgment: lightning, thunder, and an earthquake. Thus, there is overlap between 6 and 7.
- B. The seven angels might be related to the 7 archangels in Jewish apocalyptic writing, or more likely, it refers to the 7 angels over the 7 churches. Thus, the prayers specifically are related to those of the 7 churches (which of course represent the whole church).
- C. An angel brings bowls with incense which represent the prayers of the saints being brought to God. In response to these prayers, the angel takes a censer and fills it with fire to throw it on the earth in judgment. Like seals 5 and 6 where the saints pray for punishment to be inflicted upon the wicked and then the end judgment is pictured, so too here. The prayers lead to a picture of the final judgment.
- D. However, the trumpets that follow in the following chapters focus on this judgment further.

VII. **Conclusion:**

- A. What does this passage teach us and what does it call us to do? Is it a road map to the tribulation after the rapture? Is it meant to tell us future events of which we will have no part?
- B. The vision of the 7 seals and the vision of the 144,000 multitude is meant to teach us a difficult truth. Christ is actively judging the earth even now and will do so until the end. This judgment punishes the wicked by the hand of the wicked and by famine and death, but these judgments affect Christians as well, even to the point of death for many. However, the experience of Christians during the church age, though filled with suffering, is meant for their good in that God tests and strengthens their faith which cannot be lost since God has sealed us.
- C. A change of perspective:
 1. This passage calls us to change our perspective on our suffering and the suffering of others.
 2. The suffering of non-Christians is just punishment for their sins.
 3. But, the suffering of non-Christians is still a mercy of God, for it is a foretaste of Hell and is an appeal from God for them to believe.
 4. The suffering of Christians is costly. We suffer at the hand of Christ, but our God is good and he carries us through it so that in the end we might enjoy God with pure joy in his presence.
- D. This change of perspective should cause us to strive to persevere in righteousness. We might not be suffering now, but we will some day. Will we be ready? Have we sought after God in the easy times so that we are more prepared to trust him during the difficult times. We have all seen people lose their faith when things get rough. This only shows that they were not truly every believing. We must strive even now to believe the gospel. We must seek to grow in our knowledge and trust of him so that we will be ready.
- E. This change of perspective also should cause us to endure suffering differently. We often fail to see the bigger picture of our suffering. I hear people all the time saying that God is not really causing this to happen and they wish God would some how make it stop. But Christ is sovereign and our suffering is in his hands. This should not cause us to be angry, for that response only looks at the present. This vision is meant to draw us into the

reality that God has sealed and is with us in our suffering, and that God will reward our suffering in the future.