



Part 16 – Who Can Stand?

Revelation 6:12-17

The seals, trumpets, and bowls of John's vision all describe the history of the church age with particular emphasis on the experience of God's judgment. They do not represent three different eras. Rather, John sees the same history from three different vantage points. This is called "recapitulation." We see this same principle in the four different gospel accounts. It is like viewing various paintings of the same landscape from different angles. It can also be compared to a concerto in which the various movements are tied together with a melody that runs like a thread throughout the piece. This use of recapitulation is further indicated by the three references to the end of the age at the end of chapters 6, 16, and 20.

The descriptions of God's judgment upon the earth are fierce and unsettling. The four riders depicting the initial signs of God's judgment are terrifying on their own (6:1-8). They symbolize the world's all too common experience of death by violent conquest, war, famine, and pestilence. Even God's own beloved people pay a heavy price while living in a world under judgment (6:9-11). These are all the beginnings of the birth pains of God's judgment (Matthew 24:8).

1. The Inevitability of God's Judgment.

Vs. 12a – "When he opened the sixth seal..." – The Lamb continues to break the seals of divine judgment. Whereas the first five seals describe conditions in the world throughout the entire church age, the final two seals describe the last days of God's judgment upon the earth. The Lord promised the souls under the altar that the wicked will be finally judged once the full number of the martyrs has been met (vs. 11). The breaking of the sixth seal is the answer to their cry "How long?" (vs. 10).

While the judgments symbolized by the four horsemen span the history of the fallen world, the particular judgments depicted in the sixth and seventh seals are meant to be understood as the final days of God's judgment at the end of the age. The passage depicts the final judgment to come at the end of the age in several ways:

1. The judgment being described is unlimited.
2. The similarities with what is described in chapters 16 and 20.
3. The word "wrath" typically refers to the final judgment.
4. The breaking of the sixth and seventh seals follows in response to the cry of the martyrs. Their number has been completed and now the end has come.

We are wired to care about justice in ways that even our fallenness has not entirely removed. We know that things are not the way they are supposed to be and we want all that is wrong to be made right. We want to see wickedness not only removed but for proper restitution (which includes punishment) to be made. But in this fallen world, justice will only ever be approximated. Perfect justice will not be done until the Author of justice brings it about. And as hard as it may be for sinners to recognize, God's goodness and righteousness are on display in his judgment depicted in John's vision.

2. The Terror of God's Judgment.

Vv. 12b-15 – John uses language that would have been familiar to his original readers. Very similar language and images are found in the Old Testament depicting God's judgment. In the Old Testament that judgment is typically applied to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (and sometimes Jerusalem more specifically). With the breaking of the sixth seal, John describes a cosmos in process of being un-created.

"It's probably no accident that John describes the de-creation of the world with seven descriptions: a terrible earthquake, a darkened sun, a bloody moon, falling stars, a vanishing sky, and every mountain and island taken away. This complete undoing of the created order prepares for the recreation of the entire cosmos (Rev. 21:1)...Just as seven elements of creation face judgment, John lists seven categories of people: kings, great ones, generals, the rich, the

powerful, slaves, and free. They beg for the mercy of death which is preferable to giving an account to the one seated on the throne.”¹

Vs. 16 – “...calling on the mountains and the 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.’” – One scholar observes: “What sinners dread most is not death but the revealed Presence of God.”² But notice too, the Lamb that had been slain is now also the Judge of all the earth and the one whose wrath terrifies the unbelieving world.

The once solid earth will give way under the wrath of the Lamb. The light that God created will be, for a time, blotted out and the kingdoms of the world will collapse. Rather than repenting and fleeing to Christ, the impenitent will continue to turn away, seeking shelter in the crumbling earth. With the breaking of the sixth seal John describes a series of phenomena which is typical apocalyptic language the Bible uses to describe the end of the age. The same sort of language is used by Jesus in Matthew 24. The breaking of the sixth seal brings us to the threshold of the opening of the scroll, which is to say, the end of history.

3. A Place to Stand

Vs. 17 – “...for the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?” – What is being revealed in the sixth and seventh seals is the “great day” of the Lord, the final judgment. “*Their* wrath” is a reference to God the Father and the Son (the Lamb). See also Matthew 23:33 and Luke 21:36.

The terrifying account of judgment ends with a question: “Who can stand?” At first glance the question may seem to be rhetorical as though no answer is anticipated. But nothing could be more blessedly far from the truth. There is a people – a vast number of men and women from all the nations – who will stand on the firm ground of God’s mercy while all those who scorned that mercy will fall under the wrath of the Lamb.

As we will see in chapter seven (an interlude between the sixth and seventh seal) this particular people, this holy nation and kingdom of priests are the people of God, redeemed out of a world under tribulation. A nation of redeemed men and women beginning with Adam and Eve who believed the Lord in the wreckage of their own sin. That vast company includes all of those who, throughout history, have trusted in the Lord to redeem through his Christ all that had been ruined by sin. It is a vast multitude that will be completed once the final martyrs are offered up (6:11).

Expectations for believers

1. Be Courageous

The courage of the Christian in a world under judgment is not stoic detachment. Rather it is the courage that comes from complete confidence in the sovereign goodness of God to bring everything to its proper end. Telling the truth in a culture of lies requires courage.

2. Be Light

The church’s chief function in terms of how we relate to the world is found right here – We point out the way of escape. We proclaim the way of salvation from God’s just wrath. We leverage our resources toward this end. We welcome our neighbors to hear the gospel and to number themselves among the people of the Lamb. We are a city on a hill.

Expectations for unbelievers

“You’ve got to decide whether those signs are there to save you or ruin your fun.” – Rico Tice

Repent & Believe

The world’s answer to “Who can stand?” is some form of, “I’ve been a good person. I help people. I’ve been a good parent.” There is no consideration given to the fact that even in being well-behaved they have rejected the mercy of God and failed to recognize the problem of their sin. In their pride they have presumed upon the grace of God and refused any serious consideration of his holiness. Theirs is a religion of self-righteousness which is the case for all those who have not turned in faith to Jesus. The only remedy for the unbeliever is to turn away from sin (repentance) and believe in the Jesus who will take away their sin and shame.

¹ Brent Lauder, *Apocalypse Then, Now, and Soon* (Storied Publishing, 2023) p. 109

² Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: MacMillan, 1906) p. 94