



The Last Word

A Bible Study on Revelation by Stan Key

SESSION 5. WHO CAN STAND? PART I (6:1–8:1).

I. Introduction.

- A. In our last lesson we were introduced the scroll that was in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne (5:1). Only the Lamb was worthy to open the seals.
- The scroll symbolizes the destiny of the world, **human history** written in advance.
 - The writing on front and back of the scroll means everything was written that could be written. Everything we **need to know** is included.
 - The seals were probably seven globs of wax “gluing” the scroll together with the signet ring of the king imprinted in the wax. The contents were **secret** unless someone worthy could be found to open the seals.
- B. This unfolding of human history can be seen as either, 1) a picture of specific future events, or 2) a statement about human history in general. (Perhaps we don’t have to choose. Maybe **both** statements are true).

II. Six Seals are Opened (6:1–17).

- A. The first four seals comprise the famous “**Four Horsemen** of the Apocalypse.” The 7th seal will be opened in chapter 8, making possible the seven trumpets (chapters 8–11).
1. The first seal (6:1–2). The white horse.
 - Description: The rider has a bow and a crown. He has come **to conquer**.
 - Significance: But who is this horse and rider? There are two basic options:
 - a. He may represent **Jesus Christ** (cf. 19:11). This would mean that Christ precedes his judgments in the earth. His Gospel will have a victorious progress in the world. It must be preached to **all nations**, and then the end will come (Matt. 24:14). In this sense, he is very different from the other three horsemen.
 - b. He may represent an **evil imperialistic** influence coming on the earth (perhaps, even **Antichrist**). In this sense he is similar to the other three horsemen.
 2. The second seal (6:3–4). The bright red horse.
 - Description: The rider has a great sword and he takes peace from the earth so that people **destroy one another**.
 - Significance: History will be characterized by **militaristic politics**.

3. The third seal (6:5–6). The black horse.
 - Description: The rider holds a pair of scales to measure the price of food (a day’s wage buys a quart of wheat; enough for one person to subsist on). Yet oil and wine (luxury items) are plentiful.
 - Significance: History will be characterized by **economic injustice** and famine.

4. The fourth seal (6:7–8). The pale horse.
 - Description: The rider’s name is Death and Hades is following him. They are given permission to kill 25% of the earth’s population by sword, famine, pestilence and wild beasts.
 - Significance: History will be characterized by **death** and suffering.

NOTE: “Instead of discussing the probable significance of each of the four colored horses, those first listeners would undoubtedly have recoiled in terror as war, bloodshed, famine, and death galloped furiously across the stage of their imagination. Visions at best are to be **experienced** rather than analyzed.” (Mounce, p. 145f).

5. The fifth seal (6:9–11).
 - Description: John sees martyrs under the altar in heaven, crying out “**How long**, O Lord?” They were given white robes and told to wait a little longer until the full number of martyrs was complete.
 - Significance: **Martyrdom** is part of the story. There is nothing in this passage to cause us to believe we will be “raptured” away so as not to experience tribulation and persecution (cf. Rev. 7:14). The prayer of the suffering church is not for personal vengeance and retaliation. But rather for **justice** to be done in the earth and God’s reputation to be enhanced.

6. The sixth seal (6:12–17).
 - Description: John sees great cosmic signs (earthquake, stars fall, sky vanishes like a scroll, etc.). People scramble to find a place to hide from the wrath of the Lamb. They fear God’s **face** more than death itself! *Who can stand?*
 - Significance: As the divine judgment unfolds, it get progressively worse. Things fall apart! Envisioning an **angry lamb** requires sanctified imagination.

B. Lessons revealed in the unsealing of the scroll:

1. Human history is composed of wars, injustice, famine, disease, earthquakes, and death. Don’t be surprised by this. **Expect it!** (John 15:20; 16:33; Acts 14:22; I Thess. 3:3; II Tim. 3:12; I Pet. 4:1, 12).
2. God is **in control**. Nothing happens, not even the worst disasters and persecutions, without the **permission** of God himself.

3. God is working out his purposes even when it feels like **all hell** is breaking loose.
4. God's people can have peace and security even in the midst of total chaos. The Lamb wins! As the scroll is **unsealed**, God's people are **sealed** (7:1-3) so that they can finally **stand** (7:9). The four horsemen don't have the last word! Another Horse and Rider are on the way (19:11).

III. The Wrath of the Lamb (6:16).

The picture of an angry lamb is startling! And yet this image (as well as this entire passage about the seven seals unleashing God's judgment on the earth) reminds us of several important truths about the wrath of God.

- A. *Defining anger.* We tend to think of anger as a bad thing, something to be avoided, a synonym of hatred, vindictiveness, spite, rage, loss of temper, and the like. But God gets angry and he is without sin. Saints too get angry yet need not sin (see Rev. 6:10). Holy anger, righteous indignation is a "**passionate againstness.**"¹ The thing that makes anger good or bad is:
 1. Its **object** (What/who am I angry at?).
 2. Its **expression** (How do I manifest my anger?).
- B. *The fact of God's anger.* Those who try to depict God as a grandfatherly senile benevolence in heaven are sadly mistaken. Those who think that divine wrath is only found in the **Old Testament** and not in the New, simply don't know their Bibles.
- C. *The terror of God's anger.* God's wrath causes kings and generals to flee in panic to caves seeking to escape (Rev. 6:15-17). But there will be nowhere **to hide** (cf. Gen. 3:8).
- D. *The manner (method) of God's anger.* God's wrath is seen in war, famine, disease, etc. as well as in a future day when we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Many of his "judgments" are simply permitting the **consequences** of sin to come to full fruition.

¹⁸ For the wrath of God **is** revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness **suppress** the truth.

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.... So they are without excuse.... ²⁴ Therefore God **gave them up** in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.... ²⁶ For this reason God **gave them up** to dishonorable passions.

For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. ²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God **gave them up** to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.... ³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (Rom. 1:18-32).

¹ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*. (p. 165).

- E. *The motive of God's anger.* It is the crucified Lamb of God who is unleashing these judgments. His motive is **love**.
- F. *The time of God's anger.* Though the ultimate expression of divine wrath lies in the future at the final judgment (Rev. 19:15), much of God's wrath is experienced **now**, in this life (Rom. 1:18ff.; Eph. 5:6; I Thess. 2:16).
- G. *The protection from God's anger.* There is only one place to find safety when judgment on sin falls on the earth: in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The thought of God's wrath may be **unpopular**, but it is true (John 1:29; Rom. 5:9; I Thess. 1:10). ...*that on that cross as Jesus died the wrath of God was satisfied...* (*In Christ Alone*, lyrics by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty).²
- H. *The reason for God's anger.* The Gospels are quite clear about those things that made Jesus angry. The wrath of the Lamb (Jesus) is focused on specific attitudes and behaviors. So, what made Jesus angry?
1. Mark 3:5. **Hard hearts** and a willful rejection of the truth.
 2. Mark 10:14. Those who **hinder others** from coming to Christ.
 3. John 2:13–17. Treating as **common** that which is holy.
- I. *The imitation of God's anger.* The cleansing blood of Jesus and the sanctifying Spirit of Pentecost mean that in Christ we are now able to express anger even as Jesus did. In fact, God **wants** us to be angry at the same things and in the same way that Jesus was (is!). Righteous indignation is part of the **image of God** that is desperately needed in our day. *Be angry and do not sin...* (Eph. 4:25–27). But remember, you are not the judge! *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord"...* *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* (Rom. 12:14, 17–21).

TABLE TALK

1. Do you think of the unfolding scroll of your life as a happy story or as a tale of tragedy and suffering? Explain.
2. Describe your own thoughts and feelings about the wrath of God. How has the Bible study today challenged those beliefs and those feelings?
3. What makes God angry? How does he express it? What makes you angry? How do you express it? Now, what have you learned?
4. Where are angry Christians needed in the world today?
5. Do you think of martyrdom as part of the normal Christian life? Why or why not?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Mounce, Robert H. *The Book of Revelation: The New International Commentary of the New Testament*. Revised. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997
- Plantinga, Cornelius. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.

² The Presbyterian Church (USA) wanted to include this song in their hymnal but were offended by these words and suggested that they be changed to read "... the love of God was magnified." The authors refused and so the song was dropped from their hymnal.