

A Brief History of History

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[0 : 00] Well, please take your Bible and open to Revelation chapter 6, page 1031, in the back. And as you do so, I just wanted to mention, two weeks ago I had the unique pleasure and privilege of conducting and preaching at the wedding of my son and his lovely bride, Kelsey.

And it was just such a happy time, very Christ-focused reception, music, dancing, feasting, fun. My only complaint is it all went too quickly and I didn't want it to stop and I'd like to be back there. And then I came home last Sunday and I heard Dan preach Revelation chapter 4 and 5 and I want to stay in Revelation chapter 4 and 5. Because that's where the door of heaven opens and we suddenly find out that all our lives and all our concerns are replaced with this something far greater and infinitely more important.

And there is the throne at the centre of all things and the Lamb and there's this chorus and we're caught up with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. And I want to stay there. I want to stay in chapter 4 and 5.

Because when we come to chapter 6, as it was read, we come back to earth with a nasty bump. And we read about violence and disease and famine and murder and financial injustice and pestilence.

[1 : 28] And I think what makes it more troubling is that all these horrors are set moving by Jesus Christ himself. In fact, they come directly out of chapter 5, so we'll spend a moment there, and out of who Jesus is.

Because the real Jesus, as he's revealed in Revelation 5 and throughout the scriptures, is the perfect combination of two different sides, if you will, that we find impossible to hold together. He's the perfect combination of love and justice, grace and truth, mercy and holiness, power, weakness.

And we find it hard to keep these things together. And I don't know how to say this in a reverent way, but in Jesus, they're perfectly combined, so there's no conflict between these two sides. This is very important. He is the perfect lion and the lamb. He is sovereign, majestic ruler over all things, and he's the one who gives his blood as a tender, tender lamb.

[2 : 39] And the reason that's hard is because, I mean, I get angry when you don't fit my program. I get angry when my ego's bruised or I've had a personal failure.

But nothing Christ does is not full of purity and holiness. So his anger and his love are gracious and good. And he is pictured in chapter 5 as a ferocious lion and as a slaughtered lamb.

So this two-sidedness, if you will, of Jesus is very important. Because the problem, remember, in chapter 5 is a scroll. There is a scroll which is what must soon take place.

It is the future history of the world. In that scroll is everything from the resurrection of Jesus until the second coming and more. But there's no one worthy to take this.

No one can open it up. No one on earth and heaven. And then in chapter 5, verse 5, if you just cast your eyes back there for a moment, there is one who steps forward. It is the lion of the tribe of Judah.

[3 : 41] The lion. It's the conquering, ravaging, savaging power of justice-bringing punishment. But verse 6, when he turns to see the lion, John sees instead a lamb standing as though it had been slain.

So the conquering lion is the slain lamb. And to make it even stronger in the Greek, it's not the word lamb, it's a diminutive. It's the lamby.

It's the little lambykins. And as soon as he takes the scroll, all heaven breaks loose in praise. And the center of their praise is, worthy, worthy, worthy are you, Jesus Christ, to take this scroll and to set history moving.

And this word worthy is the Greek word axios, from which we get axis. And it's not just worthiness on its own.

It's worthiness that brings into balance something that's way out of balance. So if you gather up all the evil, all the injustice, all that's unfair, not just in your life or our city, our world, all crimes, lies, murder, betrayal, disease, disasters, famines, wars.

[5 : 04] Who is heavy enough to unbalance that stuff, to rebalance all those things? I mean, who has the power and goodness to outweigh all this and to bring right and justice?

And the answer is, is the lion and the lamb. And the curious thing is, what is it that qualifies him to do this? What is it that makes him so worthy? It's not his vast cosmic power which is given to him at his resurrection.

Verse 9, it's his death. You see, verse 9 in chapter 5, Worthy are you to take the scrolls and to open its seals, for you were slain.

And by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and nation, language, people and nation. So here we are at the centre of the throne room of heaven.

And here is the lamb and he conquers by being conquered. He gains victory by becoming a victim. It's the cross of Jesus Christ that is the centre of reality.

[6 : 09] It's the centre of all God's doing and it's the centre of human history. And that brings us to chapter 6, which I've called a brief history of history.

Because the basic problem for the first readers and the basic problem for us still today is the sheer randomness and pervasiveness and stubbornness and meaninglessness of evil.

And I don't know how you find it, but the older I get, the more empty I think the mantras are that we tell ourselves. This is very important for us as Christians. Christians call evil, evil.

We live in a culture where there is a kind of a stubborn naivety. It only develops in wealthy countries, where we tell ourselves this world is fine and dandy, there's something evil but it's over there, it's way over there.

And sometimes we think we can control these things by good politics or policies or big armies or just taking a very positive attitude. But the Bible doesn't let us delude ourselves.

[7 : 16] It says greed and envy and luxury and arrogance, they're all evil and they're all deeply ingrained in us. And they exercise a destructive effect on us and in our families and in our world.

One of the commentators said, We don't need Christ to tell us the world is full of troubles, but we do need his explanation of history if its troubles are not to be meaningless. And that is why as we begin chapter 6, and I think all the way from chapter 6 to halfway through chapter 19, we have a series of cycles of sevens.

Seven seals, seven bowls, seven trumpets, seven visions. And what's happening with those sevens is God is saying, It looks meaningless and it looks out of control, but I am bringing order and arrangement and I am moving my purposes forward.

And for those of you who are in the Bible studies, inside each seven there is a structure. The first four elements usually belong together and have to do with life on earth. Five and six usually take us to where the church fits in God's plan and then final judgment and chapter.

Sorry. Did I say chapter? I mean, okay. Number one, two, three, four in each of those cycles has to do with earth.

[8 : 42] Numbers five and six has to do with the church and final judgment. And then number seven takes us after final judgment. So, here we come to the six scrolls.

Chapter six only deals with six scrolls. Next week we'll deal with the seventh and this big interlude in chapter seven. And the way I want to go at this chapter is that there are two questions asked, two very good questions asked.

The first comes from the lips of Christians in verse 10 in the middle of the fifth seal. And it's in verse 10 if you just look down. And basically the question, how long, oh Lord, until you deal with evil?

You see, when the Lamb opens the fifth seal in verse 9, we're taken up to heaven under the altar. And there under the altar are the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and their witness to Christ.

One horrific story I heard this week, another atrocity from ISIS. At the end of August in Aleppo in Syria, they rounded up 12 Christians, some of whom were church planters, and they executed them because they wouldn't renounce Christ.

[9 : 59] One was a 12-year-old. They mutilated them first. They crucified them. Then they beheaded them. And before they died, these folk would call out the name of Jesus Christ.

I don't say that to manipulate you. I say that because that's the reality for so many of our brothers and sisters. Chaldean Bishop of Syria says that two-thirds of Christians in Aleppo have been either executed or they've left.

And they join this question. They say, how long? Exactly the question is, oh, sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? Actually, the word is not avenge. Literally, it means make right. How long till you judge and make right? What's happening? Now, most commentators think that this is not just about those who've been literally martyred, but it's a particularly dramatic way of picturing every true Christian because the word slain is the word that's used for the lamb.

And these are the people who are slain with the lamb, as it were. They are participating in the death of Jesus Christ. It's a picture of Christians who've given over their lives to Jesus Christ, laying down their lives based on the word of God, living under the protection of the altar.

[11 : 22] And I think this is the cry of every faithful heart, don't you? How long, oh Lord, till you remove evil from the world, from my family, from me?

I don't doubt you are just and holy and right and true, but I am weary of evil. How can you allow it to continue?

And this is a particularly poignant question in the context of the first four seals. And here we meet the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

See, a lot of people think that Christianity teaches that God reserves judgment till the end, that God will only judge the living and the dead. But until then, he doesn't really get involved in the nitty gritty, except the nice things in life.

And chapters one, sorry, seals one to four show that Christ is working in history, that he's very engaged and he is absolutely sovereign in the suffering of our world, bringing about repentance before it's too late.

[12 : 30] And each time one of the horses is released, it's set going by the lamb. So look down at 6 verse 1. Now I watched when the lamb opened one of the seven seals.

Then I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, come. And then we get this first rider on a white horse and he has an archer's bow and he is given authority to conquer and he conquered.

Conquest is his only aim. So anywhere in the world today where you see force used against the innocent, weapons to gain power and dominance, the white horse is riding.

And we could work through alphabets, couldn't we, of places in the world today? You know, Angola, Burundi, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, or Afghanistan, Burma and China around Turkmenistan.

That's the first horse, the white horse. The second is the red horse. And he's given authority to take peace from the earth so that people may slaughter each other, murder each other.

[13 : 41] Any form of strife, any time peace is removed, where there's conflict and civil unrest, and you can experience it at a family level. It's the red horse.

The black horse is famine and economic equality. And if you look down at those verses, verse 6, for example, you see, when the black horse is riding, there is terrible economic problems because you can earn enough to just pay one day's food, but not for anyone else.

You can't get food for your family, but at the same time, the caviar and the champagne continue to flow. And the fourth horse is a sort of a combination of the other three, sword, famine, pestilence, wild animals, sudden death, terror.

And you know, don't you, I mean, the Bible never sentimentalizes evil or goodness. And at every level in the world in which you and I are involved, political and social and personal, there is evil. And what the Bible just does is it removes the masks from these horsemen and shows them in their true colors. But the key for us is that all these forces are set going by the Lamb himself.

[15 : 03] Let me push you on this. The force of greed and warfare and famine and murder and hatred and pestilence, these are not the supreme powers in history.

The Lamb is the supreme power. And although you won't hear this widely said, the powers of evil are bounded and limited by the Lamb of God, but it's the Lamb who opens the seals and gives authority.

He gives the sword to the red horse rider. He gives authority to take a quarter of the population of the earth. This is more than God allowing nasty things to happen.

This is the sovereign Christ in control of all that is good and evil. He is not evil. He is not the source of evil. Sometimes he allows evil to happen.

But this is saying more than that. If all he does is to allow evil to happen, then there are parts of his creation where he's not really in control. And we end up with a God who's only involved with the really positive and happy things in life.

[16:09] And there are whole vast areas that are out of his hands. But I say again, the Lamb is good and holy and righteous and gracious and utterly sovereign over evil, including the evil that you and I experience.

And I find that profoundly hopeful. And I think that's the basis in which we call out, how long?

Because the issue of evil, it's very personal, it presses in on all of us all the time, not just from the news feeds, but from one another.

From ourselves. And what this is saying is that the death of Jesus changes everything. It changes how God works in history. We're never allowed to be too specific.

We can't look at some terrible thing and say, oh, that is directly the judgment of God on that person because they're a wicked person. In fact, Jesus warns us never to do that in Luke 13. We can say that the sufferings and judgments of history are part of Jesus establishing his kingdom.

He's not going to be too specific. He's not going to be too specific. He's not going to be too specific. He's not going to be too specific. And even in the most difficult circumstances that you and I face, the slain lamb is there at work, bringing repentance.

[17:24] And limiting pain and limiting suffering. But the wonderful thing about history is that Jesus and his judgments in history are not just punishment.

They are to bring repentance. And I think that means that we as Christians ought to be the most realistic people on the planet, right? And we look at the future. We know there's going to be conquest and strife and scarcity and death.

We expect justice not to be done in our world. But that's not fatalism. Fatalism is sub-Christian. You know, the attitude, okay, well, it's also bad.

The world can go to hell in a handbasket. I'm not going to get involved. That's hatred. That's self-righteousness. And it's very interesting, isn't it, in the New Testament, that when famine first hits the first Christians, the apostles go around the empire collecting famine relief money.

No, when we ask how long, it's not a fatalistic question. God gives the most beautiful answer. And you can see it there in verse 11. He gives to each of them, each of us, a white robe and tells them to rest a little longer until the full number of those who are to come in is complete.

[18:46] Here is the core statistic of our world. This is what makes the world move forward. I know you're bombarded. We're bombarded with statistics, aren't we? You know, EU trade statistics and election numbers which are a guilty pleasure.

Comparisons of economics and population and incomes. There's only one statistic that really matters. There's only one statistic that's holding the final judgment from coming.

It's the full number of those who will follow Jesus coming in. And what people are wearing in the book of Revelation is very important. We're going to look at this next week.

They're given a white robe. It's a picture of a life cleansed, forgiven, pure of all evil. And it's given to us by Jesus because it's not got to do with our own basic goodness but his free gift.

It's a picture of what it is to be a real Christian. And what the robe, what the white robe does here is it gives us rest. It's a source of refreshment.

[19:56] Because if the lamb is going to deal with all evil and eradicate it and if the lamb has found a way to wrap us in his righteousness so that as he deals with evil he won't destroy us, that means I don't have to take things into my own hands.

I don't have to be judge, jury or executioner for anyone. I can trust him for that. So I think the lamb and the robe is the only way to avoid cynicism and despair frankly.

I mean you may feel completely overwhelmed by something. You've tried and tried and tried and it's utterly beyond your control. And it may be true that there is little justice in this world but in the day of wrath justice will be done and the one who died for us is the one who will bring it and I think that is a great source of refreshment and rest.

He will make things right at the right time and until then he's wrapped us up in his goodness and grace and saving righteousness. So that's the first question and before you get worried we only have a little bit of time to deal with the second question.

It's a very good question too. It's a stunning question and it comes in the last three words of the chapter in the sixth seal and they are who can stand?

[21 : 23] And the question arises again from the two-sidedness of Jesus because the sixth seal is the picture of the final day of the anger and wrath of the Lamb of God.

This is the day when Christ will judge and destroy all that ruins his creation. And when the Lamb opens the sixth seal we're given a picture of final judgment the day on which God will end this world and punish all who have done evil.

It'll be the end of the universe as we know it. And the images when Paddy read it they're familiar to us if you've been reading the Bible they come from Jesus and from other parts. It is the great day toward which we're heading and all the partial judgments of history that have been done by the Lamb are going to be caught up and going to be made final on that day where there will be no chance to make another choice.

And the colours of the four horsemen come back although this time it's cosmic and total. The sun becomes black the moon turns to blood the sky the sky rolls up like a blind and the stars fall from heaven and the mountains and the islands they all run away.

And what's most interesting is we're brought into this day from the perspective of those who've pushed Christ away who've rejected Christ who don't love the face of God who have not turned to Christ for forgiveness.

[22 : 50] And if you look at verse 15 they're kings and they're great ones and generals and rich and powerful and they're everyone slaves and free. They hide themselves in the caves and among the rocks and mountains calling on the mountains and rocks fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the anger or the wrath of the Lamb for the great day of their anger has come and who can stand?

And what is most terrifying again is that it's the anger of the Lambie. Power and justice weakness and mercy holiness and love and that means that it's the worst kind of anger because it's not it's not an anger of someone who just doesn't care.

It's not an anger forgive me for this illustration of an accountant who gets to the end and says that's wrong. It's the anger of love sacrificial love.

The only way to be among this group who are facing his anger is to push Christ away from you and to refuse his power and love. It's deeply personal to him.

He's not holding you to rules. He's saying those who've held me away the most terrifying thing for them is the face of God. They would rather have the mountains fall on them than to see the most beautiful thing in all the world.

[24 : 17] The Lamb is angry with evil and I say again his anger has nothing unholy or impure or unloving in it. He has restrained himself for millennia.

He takes no pleasure and will take no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He's perfectly under control. He will perfectly set right every molecule of evil and wrong.

And the great tragedy is for those who push Christ away is that for the first time on that day they ask exactly the right question. Who can stand before this Lamb?

That is the only question because by ourselves we can't. But if we've been reading Revelation we know that the Christ who comes to punish evil is the same Christ who gave himself so as to wrap ourselves wrap us in his love so that he doesn't have to punish us.

This is what we'll look at next week in chapter 7. Christ has made a way so that we can stand before him. And I just finish by reading these two verses and commend them to you.

[25 : 27] In chapter 7 verse 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.

What were they doing? Standing before the throne and before the Lamb. Why? Because they're clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hand.

I don't know what the palm branches are there for. And crying out with a loud voice. Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. That's our prayer. That's our voice.

That's our praise. And that's how we stand. So let's bow our heads and pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.