Revelation 6 “The First Six Seals”

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[0:00] Someone was saying to me this week that Revelation has been so far, five chapters in, so much better than she expected.

It's been more hopeful and encouraging and inspiring to her. And I told her I'm really glad for that and that that has been my experience as well.
And I'm trying to believe that that is not merely because of how amazing and wonderful the first five chapters are, although they're really great.
Right? It's important for us to know, to remember that even as things get darker, okay, today, more complex in the chapters ahead, it is still true that God wins.
Grace prevails. Jesus reigns. The things we've been celebrating. Don't forget that, okay? Because we're actually, as Revelation continues, we stay right there in that throne room of heaven where the Lion Lamb has just been declared worthy.
[1:06] Worthy to break the seals and to open the scroll of God's purposes in all of history. To bring judgment. To bring blessing.

To bring blessing.
They're not harmless costumes. We're going to read this morning about what happens when the Lamb opens each of the first six seals.
And see what God shows us about some difficult realities in this world. Let's ask for His help first.
God, we rejoice. You are so good to us.
God, we rejoice. You have provided for us so abundantly beyond what we could ask or imagine. That's not just this year. That's in Your Son.
[2:25] We're grateful for Your Word that You've given us that is eternal and everlasting. And we're grateful even, Father, for the difficult parts of it. You know what we need.

And You give us what we need. You want us to run to Jesus. And You've given us Your Word so we will this morning. So help us as we listen to it and study it together. In Jesus' name.
Amen. We're going to read Revelation 6 in three sections. First verses 1 through 8.
Revelation 6. God's holy word. Now I, John, 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.
[3:27] 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. 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.
If you're already thinking, Give me back my worthy is the lamb. Hang tight.
[4:33] It gets worse. These first four seals unveil what are commonly called the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

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Now, some identify them with comic book characters or football players. But before we talk about their biblical identities, let me clarify that some look at these four horsemen along with other events in Revelation and see them fulfilled specifically in the first century with events surrounding the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.
And then other Bible scholars say, No, no, no. These are all people and events that are future, that are yet to come still today.
Those could be correct. But I think the best understanding of Revelation here is to see them as repeated occurrences throughout history.
As early as the first century, yes. Continuing in our days. We're going to see this. We continue to live in the last days, right?
[5:49] The days between Jesus' two comings. And then culminating, yes, they're right too, in the final judgment. This is not unusual with biblical prophecy.

We could look at tons of examples. Just one that's easier to follow. Hosea, the prophet, quotes God as saying, Out of Egypt I called my son.
Now, Hosea says that, which looking back clearly refers to the exodus of Israel. God's people, God's son from Egypt, right?
Hundreds of years later, however, Matthew, looking forward, says Hosea's prophecy is also fulfilled in Jesus, God's son, who after fleeing to Egypt as a baby with his parents due to Herod's threats, remember, returns to Israel.
Same prophecy, multiple layers of fulfillment. Okay? That's similar here. As God's judgment begins to be unveiled with lots of Old Testament background, including, if you want to go read, four different colored horses in Zechariah 6, with God's judgment.
[7:14] We're going to look at each one of the horses here briefly. The first horseman is on a white horse, perhaps most easily identified as Conquest.

It's the hardest one of the four to identify because some people believe the rider is Jesus himself. Others believe it's an Antichrist figure.
So all over the map as people try to understand Revelation 6. And while Jesus does ride a white horse later in Revelation, I don't think that's the best understanding here.
This horse is one of the four parts of God's justice and judgment coming on the world. They work together. White horses in this time are consistently connected to conquering heroes.
That's what you'd ride on. And that fits well here with the bow that he's holding and the crown. So conquering, and I think even more specifically maybe than just the fact that conquering happens, the ambition to conquer, to control other people, other nations, anything, that's rampant in human hearts, right?
[8:30] Conquering and to conquer. And that ambition leads to war. That's what the second seal reveals on the red horse.

Taking peace away. Slaying each other with the sword. People killing people. Can you imagine? Even brother killing brother over and over again.
We've found ourselves there, haven't we? Until there was the war to end all wars, some of you remember. And then other wars that continue to this day.
Even on the streets of our own cities. Next we get the black horse. An image of famine and scarcity. It's not that there's no food anywhere, right? But these prices mean inflation at a level where you would work all day just for enough bread, maybe to survive yourself.
[9:33] Providing for a family, tough. The fridge and the pantry are empty. No way is there anything there. But there is still oil and wine. Perhaps a reminder that at this point not everything is gone.

But it's already tough to get by. If you've never felt that deep hunger physically. That pang of hunger.
Or the fear of not finding a next meal or having one. It is a dreadful feeling that many will feel today.
And then the fourth seal unveils a pale horse.
This is the easiest one to identify. I'm going to get this one right. Because of the name, death. Followed by Hades. The place of the dead. And four methods that this horse and its rider bring for death.
They're actually identical to the four methods that God uses to judge in Ezekiel chapter 14. God's judgment as death comes with sword.

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[10:46] Think war or other weapons of killing. Famine, as we just saw. Pestilence. That's disease. Disease. Like bubonic plague.

Black death in the past. Spanish flu. Or COVID. Even cancer more recently. Right? And then wild beasts. Now more common in the first century.
But still happens today. Scary stuff. Right? Don't brush by this lightly. Don't turn your head.
I know this is not the stuff of church services usually. Right? This is dark. These things are coming as the scroll is unrolled.
All of this terrible suffering that enters the world. It's the kind of stuff that makes many people say, I can't believe in a God who allows that.
[11:47] Right? Maybe you felt or thought, God clearly doesn't care for me if my family is going hungry.

Or if my marriage is falling apart beyond my control. Or I just can't talk to God while sickness is ravaging someone I love.
Or you've heard people say, you know, when wars or shootings are going on, God is nowhere around. He's not there.
He must not be all powerful or all loving. One or both. Notice God is telling us here in his word to expect these things.
These awful things in our world. In fact, if you look closely at the passage, the lion lamb is opening the scroll.
[12:48] The scroll of God's plan to unleash these things. Where is God? While the four horsemen are marching out?

While all of this is being unveiled? Where's God? He is the only one seated on the throne. The lamb himself holding the scroll.
He is sovereign even over our suffering. And you say, well, that's great, but that's hard. It's also important to notice here that the living creatures are the ones who say, come.
And it's important to notice that God's sovereignty with regard to these evil things is described more as permissive. You might say, notice verse two, a crown was given.
Verse four, he was permitted to take peace and was given a great sword. Verse eight, they were given authority. Similar to what you might think of the situation with Job, right?
[14:04] Where God gives permission to Satan, but within limits, to bring suffering upon his beloved Job. it's important that we understand God is never the author of evil.

But he is sovereign over suffering. He's not pictured here as intentionally directive with the evil and suffering. But don't take him off the throne.
There's no one else on the throne but him, right? It's important for us. The question we need to ask as we read these words is, will you look to Jesus in your suffering?
He tells us it's going to come. Will you look to Jesus in your suffering? See, there's really two directions you can go. You could distance from God because of suffering during sickness, during marital strife, when you're struggling to find a job.
You could push away from him or you can draw near to God in your suffering. See, what would happen if you did that? I'm not saying it's easy, but if you look to Jesus, the Lamb, you'll recognize that he's on the throne, that he's holding the scroll.
[15:28] Somebody's in charge and control. And what else are you going to see? You'll see his wounds. He's the Lamb looking as though he's been slain.

You'll realize he's with me in this. He gets this. He's a man of sorrows, right? Acquainted with suffering, familiar with grief.
I can trust him. He told me, in fact, that I would face days like this and that I would need him with me because he's faced him too. I need to cry out to him.
I need to move towards him in desperation, even and especially when I hurt and when I don't understand what he's doing. I need to draw near to him. That's where he's inviting you this morning.
Let's look at the fifth seal now. Verse 9. When he opened the fifth seal, it's the Lamb again, 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.
[16:39] 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

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should be complete who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

Martyrs who have clung to God's word and stood for Jesus, they go way back to Stephen in the book of Acts, the first recorded Christian martyr.
Most of the apostles of Jesus and Polycarp, all these killed rather than denying the truth that they knew about Jesus. Poignant to me is the story of Perpetua and Felicitas.
It's around the year 200 in Carthage. These two women with others were executed just to celebrate the birthday of the emperor's son.
Perpetua, a noble woman with lots of connections, able to get free if she would just recant her faith in Jesus and as her father pled with her, would she not do so for the sake of her young son still nursing?
[18:11] She would not deny her savior. Executed with her from the other end of the social spectrum, poor Felicitas, who gave birth in prison just days before the execution and placed her newborn child in the care of beloved sisters.

Women in her church would care for her newborn. Can you imagine any way that their souls would not cry out for justice like the psalmist?
How long, oh Lord? Y'all, they're not accusing God. They're appealing to Him. They know what He's like.
He's sovereign, holy, and true. God, we know You. We trust You. And we long for You to make things right.
In fact, we know You will. And to their great encouragement, there they are under the very temple altar. This is where the blood of the sacrifices would be poured out right there underneath the altar.
[19:34] See, their lives were not wasted. They were fitting sacrifices whose cries are heard in the very throne room of heaven who are told, verse 11, what does it say?

To rest in righteousness white robes. Not just to wait, not just deal with it for a while. They will be vindicated.
He does give them rest as Jesus promised. It's Jesus' word. And He says their wait will be a little longer because there's a number set.
In other words, God counts them all, every single one. There's a number set who will be martyred before the end. Not a single one.
Outside the scroll or the eye of the lamb. Not one. See, the real sovereign, what's being communicated?
[20:35] The real sovereign, these first century Christians need urgently to know, don't they? The real sovereign was not Nero or some other emperor sending them to their deaths.

No, rather it was Yahweh Himself who is giving them eternal life. He is the one executing His plans of redemption and retribution.
He's on the throne. Now, this is hard for us to understand because I think martyrdom pretty well seems far off to most of us this morning. It does to me.
I don't wake up most days thinking, am I willing to die for Jesus today? It's just not usually a question that I'm forced to ask and answer.
But I want you to try to imagine feeling that today. This is the international day of prayer for the persecuted church. Many of our brothers and sisters around the world do wake up asking that question every day.
[21:40] Can we put ourselves in their shoes so we can pray for them? Can you think about what that would feel? You may know that most estimates are that more Christians were martyred in the 20th century than in the previous 19 centuries combined.

It's still happening. Some of them by governments, like Pastor Wang Ximing in China, 1973. He was memorialized in Westminster Abbey as 50 years since his death.
In just 50 years, his 3,000 Christians in his county in China have become 30,000. Others have been killed by religious groups that are hostile to Christianity.
Just 11 years ago, you may remember reading or even watching video that some 21 Coptic Christians were executed by Islamic state terrorists in Libya.
The reason given explicitly in writing for being people of the cross. people of the cross, the very hope of their lives, they would have won after the other and said, I'm rightly identified.
[23:10] People of the cross, but wrongly killed for it. their souls are under the altar in the throne room of heaven, but their number is apparently not yet filled up.

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This is sobering. It would not surprise me one bit if someone in this room eventually dies for his or her faith in Jesus.
So now let me ask you, when we read these words of warning, should we not soberly ask ourselves, would I die for Jesus? Would I proclaim the good news of Jesus from the Bible even with my dying breath?
Would I still trust Jesus if that's what it cost me? If you're not sure, consider the sometimes even more difficult call daily to die to self, for my reputation to die, for my resources to die, for my agenda to die for the sake of Jesus, that we might present our bodies as living sacrifices, that we might in life or in death be acceptable sacrifices under the altar in heaven, our spiritual act of worship to the worthy one, the one who's worthy of all of it, nothing could be too much to be given to him.
God's plan of redemption and retribution features things that we would never have thought of, like war, famine, sickness, suffering, death, martyrdom, and now even more sobering, if you can imagine that, the sixth seal.
[25:17] Verse 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 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? And while some of these things wars, rumors of wars, Jesus refers to in the gospels as only the beginning of the end so to speak, with this seal and we open the sixth one, it certainly seems we're nearing the final judgment, the return of Jesus the Lamb to this earth.
It's often referred to as the day of the Lord prophesied in the Old Testament to feature judgment as well as salvation. Isaiah 13, we read of creation, of falling apart, stars, sun, moon.
In Joel chapter 2, we read similar things. I'll show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood, fire, columns of smoke, the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.
[27:19] This is coming, the sun dark and the moon blood, exactly as we read here in Revelation 6. It seems to be describing the same thing. And no longer here in the sixth seal does the horror seem limited to a fraction of the earth.

If that has been any consolation, a fourth, it was said earlier in verse 8. Now, the number seven, which can be glorious in its completion in a positive sense, equally horrific, seven, the whole thing, count them, earthquake, sun, moon, stars, sky, mountains, islands, everything is shaken, trembling, right?
And it's happening, by the way, for everybody. Seven, again, kings, great ones, generals, rich, powerful, slave, and free.
This judgment is no respecter of persons, is it? All of them are doing what? They are running for cover. They're begging rocks to fall on them.
They are so desperate to avoid the wrath of the lamb. Stop there. That should shock us, right? The tender lamb?
[28:44] The one holding the scroll? The one who was himself slain? Remember, is also a lion.

He made this whole world, didn't he? So when he comes in justice to punish those who rejected his rule, who killed his beloved people, who preferred their own ways of life to his ways, his wrath is as terrible as his grace is tender.
John is giving us this vision to warn us and to give us true hope.
So what's he saying? How do we understand that? He's saying this. Friends, there is no ultimate safety, no ultimate security, no ultimate comfort or hope in the places you're used to finding it.
That's what the sixth seal is telling you. It's saying one day, the normal routines of the world that you're used to counting on as you run full speed in all your busyness, they'll be upended and fall apart.
[30:04] One day, no amount of money in your bank account or technological ingenuity will offer you protection. One day, even the strongest and most successful among us will tremble and hide with fear with no comfort coming from our connections, from our fame, from our national defense,

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from our accomplishments, no help.

None of the things that you count on will last. The lion lamb comes back and he roars out his anger against sin and death.
death. This is, in case you've heard Jonathan Edwards, sinners in the hands of an angry God or better perhaps, rebels under the hoofs of the angry lamb.
The lamb with seven eyes that you can't escape, with seven horns that you cannot overcome and none of your usual hiding places will help at all.
nothing in all creation can protect you, can save you in that day. Nothing. That's John's point. That's not all John's point.
[31:28] He's wanting you to see that there is only one safe place of refuge on a day like this one. question. You run from the lamb only by running to the lamb.

You run from his wrath by running to his mercy. He is the creator, the only one who's not part of this creation falling apart.
He is creator and he is slain for you. So that's the question that each of us has to answer today. Will you run to Jesus for refuge?
Ultimately, in your life, will you run to Jesus? Have you run to Jesus for refuge? Please hear me.
I did not ask, have you been to church? The lamb is not slowing down to ask that question. That is a paper rock. That is a false refuge.
[32:35] I didn't say, are you middle class, somewhat moral, pretty respectable? False refuge. I didn't say, are you better and faster than the average guy you know?

You know that you don't actually have to outrun the lamb, just your neighbor. No, false refuge. This is much more serious than that.
what's happening is that Jesus' holy justice is burning so white hot that it is disintegrating all of his once good creation so that he can renew it even better.
And at the same time, it is avenging the mistreatment and death of all of those he made to live with him forever who have been abused and neglected and martyred and he is coming on their behalf.
The only place to be safe is to be hidden in the lamb himself. Everything else gets destroyed. The only safe relationship is to have the doorposts of your hearts as it were covered by his blood.
[33:55] To cry out to the lamb that you will not trust in chariots or horses in strength or success in your morality or your performance but only in the blood of the lamb.

Amen? One thing nowhere else to go. Many of you know how much it weighs on me every time I try to say this that anyone would sit in this room Sunday after Sunday and hear God's word read to them calling you to flee the wrath to come to find salvation and refuge and life everlasting in Jesus that you would hear that and yet not trust him.
Please don't wait don't wait another day to trust Jesus because the next day might be this day and the wrath of the lamb comes swiftly and surely and there is no other way to read that.
I want to say one last thing. I know it's late. Everybody checks the clock. I told you it was late.
You didn't have to look how late. Kids especially kids and adults there's some genuinely scary stuff in Revelation 6.
[35:42] Okay? I get that. The lamb as he comes in judgment is worthy of being feared but I want you to hear this clearly. If you trust Jesus if you know that Jesus loves you if you have asked Jesus the strong one to save you to protect you then you don't need to be afraid at all.

Did you notice the end of the Joel passage about the day of the Lord verse 32 all sorts of judgment and darkness and justice and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.
The scroll that we're talking about is one of judgment and blessing. The last day is one of justice and salvation. Nothing will hurt you if you are with the Lamb.
Nothing. There's a lot more comfort there next Sunday. I just wanted to tell you it's coming. And then I want you to imagine that you are safely inside the Lamb.
That you are carried close to Jesus' heart so that his wrath will never harm you because he was slain and took God's wrath for you.
[37:14] Okay? That's you. You have run to Jesus. Then I've got one more question for you. Who does he want you to run to bring in with you?

food? I've used the analogy of a storm shelter before. Can you imagine sitting in a storm shelter quietly by yourself while others are running around searching for safety because there's a storm coming?

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And yes, you're safe inside, but others are running all over the place? No, friends. Open the hatch. Run to find them. Tell them about the one true refuge, the one place of safety.
Pull them in with you. That's what this should cause us to do. You know, the family member you're avoiding because it's just too awkward. The friend, you just don't want to mess up the relationship that you have.
The neighbor you just can't give the time to because you know they really don't want to have the conversation anyway. Run to them in love, with wisdom, run to them.
[38:25] This passage is warning to you, don't delay, don't avoid, don't cower in fear, grab everyone you can and run to the refuge of the Lamb together.

He alone has conquered death and Hades and says to all who trust in him, I am with you, not to harm, but to heal. Do not be afraid.
Will you run to that gloriously good Savior and will you run tell that gloriously good, eternally essential news to people who are near you and people who are far away from you?
Will you go even around the world? them. Jim Elliot ran to tell people, people who didn't know or trust Jesus, even knowing that when he went to Ecuador, he might be martyred, he was.
Even knowing when he went that he might leave behind a young wife, Elizabeth Elliot, and a young daughter, he went and he wrote in his journal the famous words, he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.
[39:58] I want you to know this morning, you can't keep your time. you can't keep your money and take it with you. You can't keep your comfortable lifestyle, it's not in your control.

You can't keep even your life here on this earth. But you can give them. Would you give them? Not even for yourself to gain, I think Jim would agree with this, so that others may gain something that they cannot lose, that they might gain the lamb and all the joy and safety and hope and life that he offers.
Run to the lamb for refuge and then run to bring others with you to him. Let's pray and ask for his help. Oh Jesus, thank you that there is a refuge.
How awful would all of this be? without your being slain for us and your taking wrath for us and your offering life to us.
And so as we thank you for that, would you show us how to live in light of how you've given yourself? Might we give things we can't keep for something that will last for eternity and impact eternity.
[41:33] Send us with joy and love with your heart because your love for those people that we love is even greater.

Give us your heart. Remind us of your love for us. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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