

# Saints in the Hands of a Sovereign God

Revelation 6:1-11

If you could ask God one question concerning the events of human history, would you ask a "what," "when," or "why" question?

- Maybe you would ask a "what" question: What will happen to me and my family? What will happen to our country? What will happen when Jesus returns?
- Others would probably ask "when" questions. This seems to be a favorite question of the disciples: "When will these things take place?" (Luke 21:7). The last question they asked him before he ascended was "Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). But Jesus wouldn't answer "when" questions. "That's not for you to know" (Acts 1:7).
- But the most helpful questions are not "what" or "when" questions, but "why" questions. If Jesus told us that he was coming in 3,500 A.D (1500 years from now), that would be interesting, but not very helpful or comforting. It doesn't really help us make sense of our lives or find comfort in our daily struggles. It's the "why" questions that challenge our faith. And "why" answers are helpful. If we have a sense of the purpose of suffering, it will give us the ability to endure in the pain.

Jesus answers "why" questions. Not with the specific detail about our particular heartache, but with something better. He shows us enough of the character of God and the ways of God in human history that we are able to trust him in the specifics. This morning Jesus is peeling back the ways of God in human history so that we can see our lives in the hands of sovereign Jesus, who is working in this world for our joy in the world to come.

It's important to see our text in its context. In chapters 4-5, we saw the great crisis of humanity in that no one in all the world of men and all the history of mankind, *not one person*, was found worthy to open the scroll sealed with 7 seals. That scroll symbolizes the sovereign plan and purposes of God for the history of the world, including God's judgment upon the Devil and his hosts, the rescue of his people, the church, and the renewal of all things in a new heaven and new earth. When John saw that no one was worthy, he wept over the devastating plight of a lost, ruined, and unredeemable world. But then Jesus stepped forward! The Lion and the Lamb was found worthy! And the scrolls were given to him. Jesus is able and worthy to open the scrolls and unfold the purposes of God on earth!

In chapters 6-8:5 we see Jesus opening each of the 7 seals, and as he does, God's purposes for human history are revealed. The 7 seals span the whole of human history from the ascension of Christ until his coming again.

## I. The Four Horsemen

*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!"*

As John watched, Jesus began opening the seals. The first 4 seals go together as a unit, and we are shown the "four horsemen of the apocalypse."

Seal 1: A rider on a white horse – given a crown and sent out to conquer.

Seal 2: A rider on a red horse – allowed to "take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another."

Seal 3: A rider on a black horse – who brings famine.

Seal 4: A rider on a pale horse, its rider's name was Death – given authority over a fourth of the earth to kill with sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts.

It would be easy to get lost in the various interpretations of these four horses and their riders. But the details are not the primary point. When an artist paints a great painting, he does not intend for you to focus on individual brush strokes or small portions of the scene, but to stand back and see the whole. It is not *inappropriate* to study the painting in great detail, but the artist's intent was not to create something to be dissected, but something to be seen, enjoyed, and experienced. Consequently, I am not going to go into great detail concerning specific interpretations of these horses and their riders. I want us to see the main point. These various images are telling one story, pointing to one basic truth.

The four horsemen are symbols of the disasters that lead to loss of life: violent warfare, siege and famine, disease, and the grave. They are not showing us the future, but the present. In other words, they do not tell us what will happen at the very end of the world, but show us the world as it is – and as it will be until Christ comes again. We are living in "the end times," and the seals depict what we can expect in these last days. We should not be surprised when we see wars and diseases and famine and all the suffering and death they possess. Jesus is clearly telling us that this is God's plan and purpose for this world in this age.

That does not mean that the life in this world cannot improve in various ways. It does. Steven Pinker has made a career out of pointing out that, contrary to what everyone thinks, the world, in many ways, is becoming better, not worse:

“In his latest TED talk, Pinker makes his case for human progress with some key data points. Last year, the world had 12 ongoing wars, 10 percent of the world population in extreme poverty, and more than 10,000 nuclear weapons. Before you panic, it’s important to recognize that 30 years ago, there were 23 wars, 37 percent of the world population in extreme poverty, and more than 60,000 nuclear weapons.”

However, before you get utopian visions of creating heaven on earth, Jesus wants us to understand that this world, this age, is still an age of death. All four horsemen point to causes of death. And this by God’s own sovereign purpose and plan.

## II. A Sovereign Lord

As we said last week, the scroll contains the plans and purposes of God for this world. What we see in chapters 6-8 are the seals being opened by the Lamb. This is the main point of the vision. All four riders are sent by the authority of the Lamb and proceed at his command and within his set bounds.

The first horseman is given a crown; he is given authority and power to conquer. Who gave him that authority? Jesus did.

The second horseman is permitted to take peace from the earth so that people should slay one another. Who gave him that permission? Jesus did.

The third horseman is allowed to bring a food shortage that drastically increases the costs for wheat and barley, and yet is commanded not to harm the oil and wine. There are boundaries set on the damage he is allowed to do.

The fourth horseman is given authority over a fourth of the earth to kill with sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts. Again, we are meant to see the sovereign hand of Jesus controlling all this.

We have here a vision of awful, destructive, fatal events happening on earth – and all under the supervision and authority of the Lamb. The four horsemen and all the suffering, pain, and death that they symbolize are sent by the Lamb!

**G.K. Beale:** “Revelation 6-8 is intended to show that Christ rules over an apparently chaotic world and that suffering does not occur indiscriminately or by chance. This section reveals, in fact, that destructive events are brought about by Christ for both redemptive and judicial purposes.”

Let’s put this in real terms. How do you make sense of the incredible atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? It is estimated that in WWI, 17-20 million people lost their life. WWII estimates range between 60-80 million. In our lifetime we’ve seen horrific genocides like that in

Cambodia and Rwanda. In the past 15 years we've seen natural disasters like the tsunami that killed 230,000 people in Indonesia in 2004, and 18,000 people in Japan in 2011.

This is called "the problem of evil." Many people confidently assert that it is not possible for there to be a God in heaven if such terrible things happen on earth. The world simply doesn't have a category for a loving sovereign God who ordains terrible things for good ends. Unfortunately, the church is losing that category as well.

One of my chief concerns with modern American Christianity is that its shallow understanding of God has no category for real suffering and widespread tragedy such as the four horsemen symbolize. If the God you profess to believe in truly desires your best life now, you will inevitably think he has failed you when your life, and the world as you know it, plunges into WWII.

But what if the violence, evil and death we see in the world are not evidence of God's absence, but his presence? What if they are precisely God at work judging this world? What if they are not signs of his apathy towards men but his wrath? What if they happen not because he doesn't care about this world but precisely because he cares with all the love and vengeance of his fatherly heart?

This vision invites us to consider the suffering of this world from an entirely new perspective. What if the evil of this world is not simply evidence of a world at war with God – but God at war with the world? Do you see? What if God was at work, in the evil of this world, in divine judgment on the world? We have examples of this in Scripture.

Pharaoh's rebellious refusal to submit to God was a grievous sin, but ordained by God to be the context for Pharaoh's own destruction. No one could deny that the drowning of Pharaoh's entire army in the Red Sea was a just act of God in response to Pharaoh's persistent rebellion.

What if man's rebellion against God was truly so weighty in its offense, so incredibly evil, that World Wars and tsunamis were just and appropriate responses? Revelation 6 forces us to consider that God is much greater, much, much more worthy of worship and honor and glory than we have ever conceived; and that, consequently, his judgments against this wicked world, as awful as they are, are truly just.

I am convinced there are no angels in heaven shaking their head in quiet disbelief over the judgments of God against this wicked world. On the other hand, I would not be surprised at

all If there are countless thousands of angels in heaven who stand in stunned amazement at God's patience and goodness to this world.

How does this not make God the author of evil? There is a place where we need to simply acknowledge that God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts. I don't have an airtight answer to that question. But we have a clue in the cross of Jesus Christ. That was the most profoundly evil thing that ever happened on the face of the earth. And yet, Peter confidently proclaims that the leaders put Jesus to death, "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). God ordained that act of evil, in order to accomplish HIS purposes. In that evil act, the Devil was defeated and the elect of God were rescued.

That is a profound insight into the ways of God. The evil that is taking place in our world is "according to the plan and foreknowledge of God" – and to similar, God-glorifying, Devil-destroying, church-redeeming ends. But we will not be able to take comfort in the vast, goodness of God's plans and purposes if we do not acknowledge and embrace his actual sovereignty in the affairs of this world.

Sovereignty is not the problem – it is the **comfort** for those who are willing, in light of the cross of Christ, to accept that God is ordering the world exactly as we would want him to do if we knew what God knows and were able to see the end that God sees.

However, that does not make it easy! The judgement of God on the world will result in the suffering of the church. That's what we see in the 5<sup>th</sup> seal.

### III. A Suffering Church

*6:9-11* 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. 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 should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

There are a few things we need to see.

What do we know of those who have died in faith? We are told several things about their experience there.

- They are "souls," their true personhood, in conscious existence in the presence of Christ. That's what "under the altar" means – they are not under a piece of furniture; they are in the holy of holies, under the loving, sheltering arms of God.
- They were given a white robe, the robe of purity and victory. In other words, they are glorified in the presence of Christ as conquerors – not as victims.
- They are told to rest yet a little while. They are already enjoying the Sabbath rest – the *shalom* of God.

Secondly, what are they doing? They are calling out for God to act and vindicate their suffering and their death. In other words, they are not shocked by the **severity** of God's dealing with this wicked world, but by his **leniency**. "How long?" It's a "when" question. These saints are eager to see justice done on earth, to see God vindicated in all his glory as he destroys his enemies and accomplishes the full redemption of his bride.

Third, Jesus answers their "when" question with a "why" answer. He tells them they will continue to rest until *"the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been."*

What a word! God has *appointed* a certain number of his children to be martyrs. He has appointed that some of our brothers and fellow servants are to be killed by this wicked world. The suffering and death of God's children is not by accident; it is not the unfortunate by-product of living in a world under judgment. God has determined to glorify his name and accomplish his saving purposes in the world **through** the martyrdom of his saints!

Why? Because God has other sheep to gather in, and one of his key methods of saving the lost is through the suffering of the saved. I don't know in specific detail why the Lamb allows our specific pain and suffering and trials. But Jesus wants us to know in general detail why he does. It's because this is a day of grace and there are many elect children of God still to be gathered in; and Jesus asks us to suffer with him and for him so that these others may be saved as well. Are you willing to do that?

What will they and we one day experience? The 6<sup>th</sup> seal shows us the final glory of all his redeemed children.

**Rev. 7:9–17** *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, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the*

*Lamb!"...Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" 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. 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. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. 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."*

That is what is yet to come. Jesus wants us to see the glory that he has prepared for us. He wants us to live in this world with our hearts set on the world to come. To live here, enduring suffering with the joyful conviction that our Jesus reigns. He knows what he is doing. And he promises to be your Shepherd, now and through eternity. Isn't that enough?