

# THE WRATH OF THE LAMB

## Revelation 6:12-17

Rev. Dr. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, January 20, 2013

---

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 (Rev. 6:12).

**T**he cycles of history that begin in Revelation 4 can be identified by their various presentations of the final judgment. The first cycle, beginning in chapter 4, presents the seven seals of history, concluding with the disruption of creation in 6:12-17 and chapter 7's corresponding vision of the assembled saints in heaven. Subsequent visions will present the blowing of the final trumpet, at which the dead are judged and the destroyers are destroyed (Rev. 11:15-19), the coming of angels to reap the earth with a great sickle (Rev. 14:14-16), the pouring out of the bowls of wrath (Rev. 16:17-21), the fall of Babylon the great (Rev. 18:1-24), the white horseman who treads "the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God" (Rev. 19:15), and the great white throne judgment in which Satan and unbelievers are cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:11-15). These seven scenes explore different facets of the same great event, which Revelation 6:17 labels, "the great day of [God's] wrath."

In terms of the first cycle of history, found in chapters 4-7, the Day of Judgment appears with the opening of the sixth seal. The first four seals unleashed the horsemen of conquest, violence, famine, and death, depicting the woes that will characterize the entire church age, from Christ's ascension until his return. The fifth seal showed the souls of the martyrs in heaven who died in the midst of these four seals. The sixth seal answers the prayer of the martyrs for justice and

vengeance upon the dwellers of earth. God told them to wait “until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete” (Rev. 6:11), and the sixth seal shows that this waiting will be fulfilled in God’s timing. As seven is the number of completion and salvation in Revelation, six is the number of man. Thus, when Christ “opened the sixth seal” (Rev. 6:12), the day of God’s wrath appeared. William Hendriksen writes: “It describes the one great catastrophe at the end of this age. The dread and terror, the awe and consternation of that day is pictured under the twofold symbolism of a crashing universe and a thoroughly frightened human race.”<sup>1</sup>

## THE DISRUPTION OF CREATION

**A**s we consider the disruption of creation depicted in verses 12-14, there are two important questions that need to be answered and which must be taken together. First, are these descriptions to be taken symbolically or more or less literally, and, second, what is the event they describe? There are two main answers. Those who hold the *preterist* position (the name is derived from a Latin word meaning *past*), hold that this cataclysmic language is symbolic of societal upheaval and collapse rather than describing a physical dissolution. Under this view, which is coupled with an early dating of Revelation, the calamity described here is not the final judgment but the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The alternative view holds that while symbolic language is used the sixth seal depicts literal calamities at the end of the world in the final judgment.

The arguments of the preterists in favor of a symbolic interpretation are impressive. Primarily, they show that these images of physical calamity are drawn from Old Testament passages in which these same images are used of historical events describing God’s interventions and especially depicting the fall of cities and empires. An earthquake appears in Exodus 19:18 to depict God’s arrival on Mount Sinai and in Nahum 1:5 to describe the conquest of Nineveh. The sun was darkened when God judged Egypt in Exodus 19:21-23, and Ezekiel 32:7 shows the moon not giving light in a later judgment of Egypt. The falling of stars was used in Joseph’s dream to depict the eclipse of his brothers (Gen. 37:9). Most of these metaphors appear in Isaiah’s

---

<sup>1</sup> William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1940, 1967), 107.

prediction of Babylon's fall: "Behold, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger... For the stars of the heavens and the constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light... I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the LORD of hosts in the day of his fierce anger" (Isa. 13:9-13).

In these passages, astronomical calamities represent the fall of rulers and nations. In the case of the sixth seal, preterists apply this imagery to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, since verse 13 alludes to a fig tree, which Jesus used as an image of Israel's judgment (Mt. 21:19-20). Moreover, they point out that a literal fulfillment is not physically possible since, for instance, stars are far too vast literally to fall to the earth. Under this view, then, the sixth seal foretells the removal of the Jewish opposition to the gospel, just as God would later remove Rome for the sin of persecuting the church. Douglas Kelly writes: "Indeed, in due time, God will shake down everything else that opposes his church to make room for the kingdom of love and grace."<sup>2</sup>

There are reasons, however, to take the differing view that the sixth seal foretells the literal dissolution of creation in the final judgment of God. First, while we agree that this symbolism is often used in the Old Testament for falling empires and the conquest of cities, there are other passages showing that these temporal judgments anticipate the great and final day of judgment when the earth itself will be destroyed. Isaiah 24 uses the imagery of the sixth seal in saying "the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate... the Lord will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth" (Isa. 24:1, 21). Most significant is the prophecy of Isaiah 34:4, which John seems to be quoting directly in Revelation 6:12-14. Here, God is addressing the entire earth: "Let the earth hear, and all that fills it... For the Lord is enraged against all the nations" (Isa. 34:1-2). Isaiah continues with language virtually repeated by John: "All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree" (Isa. 34:4). Isaiah is describing universal judgment in which creation itself is dissolved. This fits Revelation 6:17's description of this event as "the great day" of God's wrath. Additionally, the sixth seal answers the prayers of the fifth seal, which call for judgment on

---

<sup>2</sup> Douglas F. Kelly, *Revelation*, Mentor Expository Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: 2012), 135.

the entire world (Rev. 6:10). Moreover, the language used here occurs elsewhere in Revelation to describe the final judgment of all mankind (11:13; 16:18-20; 20:11).<sup>3</sup>

Finally, a literal reading of the sixth seal fits Jesus' depiction in the Olivet Discourse. Jesus spoke of the sun being darkened, the moon not giving light, the stars falling, and the powers of heaven being shaken in tandem with his Second Coming and the end of the age (Mt. 24:29-32). There, Jesus used the metaphor of the fig tree in the same sense as Isaiah 34:4 and Revelation 6:13, as a lesson of the need to be ready for the end. This literal teaching is confirmed in Peter's second letter: "the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed" (2 Pet. 3:10).

Even in depicting the literal disruption of creation, there is probably symbolism in these verses. Still, a mainly literal reading is possible. A great earthquake of unprecedented violence could spew up lava and ash to darken the sky and the falling of stars could refer to asteroids smashing the earth. George Eldon Ladd summarizes: "the language is not merely poetical or symbolic of spiritual realities but describes a real cosmic catastrophe whose actual character we cannot conceive."<sup>4</sup>

Verses 12-14 describe either six items, if we take the removing of the mountains and islands together, as John presents them, or seven items if we take them separately. If six items, the idea is probably that of imperfection which warrants judgment, and, if seven items, the idea is that of the complete destruction visited on the earth. David Chilton writes: "Just as the salvation of God's people is spoken of in terms of creation..., so God's judgments... are spoken of in terms of de-creation, the collapse of the universe – God ripping apart and dissolving the fabric of creation."<sup>5</sup>

Verse 12 speaks of "a great earthquake, accompanied by the sun becoming "black as sackcloth" and the full moon "like blood." Many of the cities to which John was writing had suffered devastation from earthquakes. Here the shaking of the whole creation makes way for

---

<sup>3</sup> See G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 396-9, as well as Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 450-1, for a thorough presentation of a mainly literalist interpretation. Kelly, *Revelation*, 130-6 gives the preterist view.

<sup>4</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 108.

<sup>5</sup> David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 196.

the new creation in the return of Christ (Hag. 2:6-7; Heb. 12:26-27). As the darkening of the sun and moon portended the fall of empires in the Old Testament, here it is the entire earth that comes under judgment. The sun being described with reference to the black goat's hair of sackcloth adds the idea of humiliation and mourning. The blood-colored moon signified pending calamity in divine judgment.

Verse 13 adds "the stars of the sky" falling to earth, "as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale." Whether this speaks of meteors or symbolically depicts the sky falling like late fruits falling in a gale, the image strikes terror into hearts. Jesus said, "there will be terrors and great signs from heaven" (Lk. 21:11). Robert Mounce writes that the "falling of stars... could mean but one thing to the ancient – the end had come."<sup>6</sup> The same could be said about the fifth event: "The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up" (Rev. 6:14). Whether the sky is broken in the center to roll back both ways or rolled up from one end to the other, the picture is the dissolution of the cosmos as viewed from earth. Just as Jesus' first coming saw "the heavens being torn open" for his baptism (Mk. 1:10), in his second coming sky will be finally rolled up (Heb. 1:12). These images make certain that these events occur at the end of history, not merely close to the end, as Dispensationalists teach, since the falling of the stars and the tearing of the sky can only signal the end of the age.

Finally, objects that have symbolized permanence for centuries, mountains and islands, are removed from their places (Rev. 6:14). This depicts what will be celebrated later in Revelation: "the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4). Taken together, these images show the dissolving of the world corrupted by Adam's fall into sin (cf. Gen. 3:17) and condemned by its rejection of God's Son so that a new age of glory and a renewed cosmos may take its place in the return of Christ to earth.

## THE DISMAY OF MANKIND

**N**ot only does the sixth seal destroy the corrupted cosmos, but the upheavals picture the terror and dread that the condemned human race will not escape. Thus in addition to the dissolution of creation, John sees the dismay of sinful mankind:

---

<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *Revelation (Revised)*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), ?

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?” (Rev. 6:15-17).

Here, John sees six categories of condemned mankind (or seven, if the last couple is separated), who experience the great day of wrath. They describe all classes of society, showing that distinctions are lost in God’s judgment of unbeliever. Beale writes that this list shows “that God is no respecter of persons but judges all on an equal basis regardless of their social, political, or economic standing.”<sup>7</sup> The prominence, however, is given to judgment of the rulers and the great of the world. The martyrs prayed for God to judge and avenge “those who dwell on the earth” (Rev. 6:10), and it starts at the top.

First are the kings, who Psalm 2 said had “set themselves... against the LORD and against his Anointed,” and now are broken “with a rod of iron” (Ps. 2:2, 10). Together with them are their deputies, “the great ones,” who as princes or cabinet members shared in the earth’s ungodly rule. They are joined by “the generals,” who enjoyed martial glory but now face divine wrath. The “rich,” who often exerted more control than kings and presidents, also face judgment, together with the influential and “powerful” (Rev. 6:15). All of these kinds of people ran the world in its rebellion to God and together opposed the gospel reign of Jesus Christ. With them are the upper and lower classes of common people – “everyone, slave and free” – who face the dreadful condemnation their rebellion against God deserves.

The dismayed human race responds to the final judgment in two ways. First is a vain attempt to flee. They called “to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us’” (Rev. 6:16). In this way, they state that nothing is worse than facing the judgment that has come. Yet none will be able to escape. James Boice writes that when disaster strikes a country, “dictators will have deposited fortunes in Swiss bank accounts. Generals will have planes waiting to whisk them to a safe haven in South America. Even common people will have ways of avoiding the disaster. But not when God comes to execute his

---

<sup>7</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 400.

judgments.”<sup>8</sup> In that day, all – high and low, rich and poor, free and slave – will cower before God’s wrath and yet fail to escape the universal terror of the day of wrath.

Coupled with their attempt to flee is their terror in God’s judgment. This is why they find death preferable to “the face of him who is seated on the throne” (Rev. 6:16). Like Adam and Eve fleeing from God in the Garden after they had sinned (Gen. 3:8), the human race is unified in desiring above all to avoid the face of their Creator, against whom they had so viciously rebelled, and whose countenance is now revealed in wrath. Here we are shown that “What sinners dread most is not death, but the revealed Presence of God.”<sup>9</sup> God is revealed to condemned humanity as the enthroned Creator and as the Lamb whose offered salvation was spurned and despised. How total is their alarm be when “the great day of their wrath has come!”

Dismayed mankind cries in despair, “Who can stand?” (Rev. 6:17). The answer is given in chapter 7, which shows the great host of redeemed believers in heaven, who believed the gospel, confessed their need of forgiveness, embraced Jesus as Savior and Lord, and in this way were delivered from the wrath to come. John sees “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!’” (Rev. 7:9-10).

## THE GREAT DAY OF WRATH

**I**n reflecting on the dire events depicted under the sixth seal, there are four applications we should consider. The first application notes that *since the earth is to be destroyed in God’s judgment, we should live with an aim to the world to come and not to this present, passing world.*

The New Testament is filled with this argument. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that “the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31). Therefore, even though Christians are free to enjoy the things of this world we should not live for them. This world will not

---

<sup>8</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 19:9.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977, reprint of 1911 edition), 94.

last and even its best achievements, monuments, and glories are destined to perish apart from Christ. If we believe this world will make way for the eternal kingdom of Christ, then we should seek the treasures of his realm. We should honor Christ through obedience to his Word, serve the growth and well-being of his church, and share the gospel so that more people can inhabit eternity with us. This application urges each of us to take stock of our lives to see if our priorities are on earth or in heaven. What would a study of your calendar, your bookshelf, your checkbook, or your facebook page say about your heart? Is it set on earthly things or on Christ and his kingdom? Peter addressed this issue in his second letter:

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! (2 Pet. 3:11-12).

A second application was likely on John's mind as he penned Revelation to churches facing persecution. I mentioned earlier the preterist reading of Revelation, which sees the sixth seal as describing only the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Another of their arguments comes from verse 16, where those who are judged call on the mountains and rocks seeking refuge. Jesus spoke of this to the daughters of Jerusalem who were lamenting as he carried the cross. Jesus told them to weep for themselves and their children, since the day will come when they "say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us'" (Lk. 23:28-30). The presence of this same warning in Revelation 6:16 does not prove, as preterists claim, that the sixth seal describes only the fall of Jerusalem. It does show, however, that God's final judgment on all mankind is anticipated in judgments throughout history against those who oppose his gospel and persecute his people. God destroyed Jerusalem for its rejection of Christ and hatred for his gospel, having forewarned the Christians to escape the city (Mt. 24:15-20). God later judged and destroyed the Roman empire after the Caesars had persecuted Christians and then corrupted the church when the gospel had been adopted.

The pattern of God's judgment on enemies of his gospel and deliverance of his people is repeated throughout history. Whether it was the French Revolution, Nazi Germany, or Communist Eastern



Europe and China, God has judged the rulers and powers that opposed his gospel and persecuted the church. Today, godless humanism and government hostility to Christianity can only bring divine judgment on America. Just as God answered the prayers of verse 11 with the judgment of verses 12-17, the prayers of suffering believers today are heard by God and will be answered. Knowing that God saves his people, *Christians facing opposition and hardship should not give up or give in to the world but persevere in faith, prayer, and a loving gospel witness, knowing that redemption is near.*

Third, *believers in Christ should not fear being caught in this dreadful wrath.* Verse 16 says that the final judgment reveals “the face of him who is seated on the throne.” This is therefore not an overthrow of the plan of history described in the Bible but its fulfillment. The promises of God are established by this throne. Chapter 4 showed God’s throne encircled by the rainbow that reminds him of his covenant of grace. Romans 8:30 says that “those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” This is the will of the sovereign God enthroned in heaven for his people in Christ. Romans 5:1-2 says that “since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” Reading this woeful passage, we ask, “Will I survive the end of the world in judgment?” Derek Thomas writes:

There is only one sure way to answer that question. We must believe the message of the gospel that says that faith in Jesus Christ delivers us from the wrath which is to come. The great answer of chapter 7 is that every single soul that Jesus seals in this world, will withstand the judgment of the world to come. Every single one!<sup>10</sup>

Finally, *those who have heard the gospel but have not yet believed should realize that the present age of grace, and the opportunity for salvation, will end suddenly and be followed by final judgment and divine wrath.* If you have not embraced Jesus for salvation, then you will be in this picture, desperately unable to escape the wrath of the Savior you personally had spurned. You, above all others, should realize now that the judgment to come is not only the great day of God’s justice but also “the wrath of the Lamb” (Rev. 6:16). Mankind had rejected the Lamb who was slain for the forgiveness of sin and

---

<sup>10</sup> Derek Thomas, *Let’s Study Revelation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 59.

now will suffer God's wrath at his hands. Beale writes: "The gentle Lamb who was slain on the cross is now in an exalted position over the whole cosmos... to pour out his wrath. He is not only loving to his people but also a just judge of his enemies."<sup>11</sup> When the world's only Savior has become its wrathful judge, there will then be no salvation for any who did not previously come to Jesus in humble, repentant faith.

In May 1980, geologists noticed warning signs that Mount Saint Helens in Oregon would soon blow in a colossal eruption of ash and fire. Harry Truman, named for the President, was caretaker of a lodge on Spirit Lake, five miles north of the volcanic mountain. He heard the warnings broadcasted on radio and television. When the police evacuated the area, Truman refusing to budge. Friends contacted him, urging him to flee, but Harry refused to heed the warnings. He even appeared on television laughing away the danger. But at 8:31 a.m. on May 18, the mountain exploded. Millions of tons of rock flew ten miles into the sky, concussion waves crashed down the mountain faster than the speed of sound, and everything in 150 square miles was flattened. Afterwards, no sign of Harry Truman was found. He was destroyed in a cataclysm he foolishly denied, which he could easily have escaped until the moment when it came.<sup>12</sup>

I earlier cited Psalm 2, which notes the rebellion of the kings and rulers of earth and their destruction under the iron rod of Christ. The psalm ends with an appeal, a warning, and a promise for us: "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him" (Ps. 2:12).

---

<sup>11</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 403.

<sup>12</sup> Cited from Boice, *Revelation*, 19:12.