

## Saint Paul Sunday Morning Bible Class Book of Revelation, Chapter 6 Notes and Questions

### Introduction to the Three Sevenfold Visions

- The Three Sevenfold Visions of Judgment in Revelation cover the same time period, from the Ascension of Jesus to the Last Day, when He returns in glory. The Lamb of God, who alone is worthy, breaks the seals and opens the scroll to reveal to St. John what will take place in the course of human history until Christ returns. However, *“the events displayed in these visions are not given for the purpose of predicting particular events in human history. Rather, they are presented so as to portray conditions, circumstances, situations, environments, and contexts in which people find themselves during the time period covered”* (Brighton). Remember, this is apocalyptic literature, which uses figurative, symbolic language. These visions are not to be interpreted literally, as some suggest (Dispensationalists, e.g., *Left Behind* authors). The symbolic imagery reveals to St. John what is happening in the world of his day and what will continue to happen in the world until the Last Day. The fact that these Three Sevenfold Visions cover the same time period can be clearly seen by the similarities shared by the visions. While there are distinctive characteristics of each vision, one cannot miss the underlying parallelism that clearly exists.
  
- So, what does St. John see? The Three Sevenfold Visions depict the reality of sin in the world, but also assures us that God is in control. Living in this sinful world will be a struggle for Christians, but they are comforted to know that there will be an end to their struggle and suffering, for their Lord and Savior rules over all things. Christians are assured that it is God who *allows* bad things to happen in the world in order that people may see that there is something definitely wrong with the cosmos and be turned to the only One who can make things right, Jesus Christ. This is the purpose of each vision: To work repentance and give the encouragement of faith and hope. *“The hearer is meant to receive each vision in such a way that, as he fearfully heeds its sevenfold message, he is moved to repentance and faithful hope in the reigning of Christ”* (Brighton). Revelation provides an answer to those who ask, “Why do bad things happen?” Bad things happen so that people may be reminded of God’s judgment upon sin and be turned to Christ. Now, that doesn’t always happen, as we well know. Sometimes God allows evildoers to be given over to their passion for evil (Rom. 1). But, this is not God’s fault. Throughout history, He reminds us that the Day of Judgment is coming. If people do not heed His call to repentance, that is their fault.
  
- The sevenfold structure of these three visions is a common motif in the Jewish tradition known to St. John and his first-century hearers, especially in apocalyptic literature. Both three and seven are numbers related to God (three – Trinity; seven – God’s symbolic number of perfection) and further show that God is in charge of the course of human history. The fact that three visions are given to St. John, instead of just one vision, shows the longsuffering and patient nature of Almighty God. He is “slow to anger” and gives not one, not two, but three “warnings” to His people on earth to remain steadfast in the faith amidst the suffering that they will endure while living in this sinful world. These visions reveal the ultimate purpose of Revelation: To inspire the Church Militant to remain faithful to the End and to pray with St. John, “Amen, come now, Lord Jesus!”

## **Rev. 6:1-8 – The Opening of the First Four Seals: “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”**

- *“The opening of the first four seals of the scroll by the Lamb of God introduces four horsemen who go forth to spread terror and sufferings of one kind or another” (Brighton).* These four horsemen are employed to symbolize God’s judgment against human sin. His judgment will be revealed throughout human history in the tribulations commonly experienced by human beings living in this sinful world. These judgments foreshadow the Final Judgment which will take place on the Last Day. The fact that there are “four” judgments has Biblical precedent (see Ezekiel 14:21).
- In apocalyptic literature, symbols taken from human, earthly life are used to portray events or personages common to human experience. Thus, the symbols of horsemen are used to portray events that will be experienced on earth. When symbols are created which do not exist in common human experience, supernatural events are being portrayed (e.g., Rev. 9:1-11).

**The First Horseman (Rev. 6:1-2):** Some commentators believe this first horseman refers to Christ Himself since he wears a crown, rides a white horse, and conquers. However, this interpretation breaks down when one considers that all four of these horsemen are portrayed as equals. Revelation makes it clear that no one is equal to Christ (He alone is worthy to sit on the Father’s throne and break the seals). Also, the fact that this horseman leaves bloodshed, famine, death, and the grave in his wake – Christ and His Gospel leave just the opposite – faith, peace, and victory. The fact that this horseman carries a bow also makes it difficult to see Christ portrayed here, for He is always pictured carrying a sword. Thus, the first horseman definitely does not symbolize Christ.

What it does symbolize and represent is every form of tyranny won by power and force which is used to exploit, enslave, dominate, and terrorize human beings living on earth. This does not only envision great Empires or governmental tyranny, but tyranny on every level of human existence, whether institutional or individual, lawful or unlawful.

The picture St. John sees here is the reality that has played itself out in human history right up to the present day, namely, that people in this world exert their power and authority over others. This occurs at every level of human existence – governmental, educational, economic, domestic, and even ecclesiastical. The “white” color of this rider’s horse symbolizes the fact that those who seek to rule over others often claim to have the authority to do so, and even that it is best for them to do so (mocking the holiness and righteousness which belongs only to God and His Lamb, who alone have such authority).

**The Second Horseman (Rev. 6:3-4):** The second, third, and fourth horsemen follow in the wake of the first and show forth the results of the tyranny established by the first – bloodshed, famine, and death. The second horseman rides a “red” horse, which symbolizes warfare and bloodshed. One result of tyranny on earth is the taking of lives to remain in power. What this vision reveals to St. John (and, thus, to us) is that the norm throughout human history until Christ returns will be conflict, warfare, and bloodshed. The exception will be peace and tranquility. Who could possibly deny that this is exactly what we see throughout history right up to the present day.

The Good News for Christians is that they have peace in Christ even though they live in this world of conflict. They find this peace and escape the world when they encounter Christ in His Divine Word. What is going on in the world is not beyond His control (all of these horsemen are “given” the power to act; they cannot act on their own, but only by the permissive will of Christ, who allows

them to act to warn the world to repent and flee the wrath which is to come). Christ will put an end to the warfare and bloodshed when He returns. Until then, Christians can find their refuge in Him. They will suffer from living in this sinful world, but their suffering will come to an end and they will enjoy everlasting peace with Him in His kingdom.

**The Third Horsemen (Rev. 6:5-6):** The steed of the third horsemen is “black” which symbolizes death, which in the ancient world most often resulted from famine. Not only will human history consist of warfare and bloodshed, but also of famine. The “pair of scales” represents the economic imbalance that will always exist in the world. In other words, there will always be “haves and have-nots,” those who have plenty and those who have little or none. In this case, it is specifically referring to food. Some people will have food in abundance, while others will have little or none; some will be filled, some will starve – such is the way of life in this sinful world. The description, “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!” simply adds detail to the fact that what is being depicted is the reality of famine in the world. A denarius was the average wage of a day’s work and what is depicted here is the great cost a worker would have to feed his family, something he would often be unable to do. The oil and wine are not to be harmed, that is, are not to be allowed to spoil. The poor will not be able to afford such luxuries, so they are given to the rich to be consumed. In short, the rich will have plenty, the poor will have little or none. The tyranny of the rich (those in power) over the poor is not only seen by their violent acts of bloodshed, but also by their denial to share their plenty with them. Again, this will be the general rule throughout human history – the wealthy sharing with the poor will be the exception (incidentally, this “exception” is to be the rule in the Church, for brothers and sisters in Christ are to share all things with each other, etc.).

**The Fourth Horsemen (Rev. 6:7-8):** The rider of the “pale” (or “ghostly green”) horse is named “Death” and “Hades” follows with him. This rider symbolically demonstrates that death is the result of the tyranny, bloodshed, and famine inflicted by the first three horsemen. “Death” follows the first three horsemen to collect their victims and commits them to “Hades” (“Hades” here has the broad meaning of “grave” and not necessarily of “Hell,” for even believers in Christ will be victims of the horrors inflicted by these horsemen). It is NOT Death and Hades that are “given authority over a fourth of the earth,” for the “they” in verse 8 refers to all four horsemen. St. John sees each horsemen individually at first, but then he sees all four ride off together to inflict judgment upon the earth. The fact that “a fourth of the earth” is inflicted shows forth God’s grace and mercy, for, while tyranny, bloodshed, and famine will be the general rule on earth throughout human history, He will permit only a minority to experience the ultimate suffering of death at their hands. “Pestilence” (deadly disease) and “wild beasts” are added here to show that the tyranny, bloodshed, and famine will not only come by human hands, but also by disease and animals. Again, human history shows forth the horrors depicted by the four horsemen. Millions upon millions have perished at the hands of tyrants and through wars, famines, disease, and attacks from the wild animal kingdom. These things are very evident in our day and age. How long will these things take place? How long will these four horsemen be permitted to inflict their horror upon the earth? Until the Last Day when Christ returns! This is why the return of Christ is the “blessed hope” of all Christians, for they long for the Day when the horror of living in this sinful world will be forever removed.

## **Rev. 6:9-11 – The Opening of the Fifth Seal: “The Saints Beneath the Altar”**

- “The souls beneath the (incense) altar” are the glorified saints in heaven who remained steadfast in Christ’s Word unto death. This does not only refer to the saints who were physically executed on earth, but to all the saints who kept the faith until the end. All Christians are “slain” for the Word of God, even if all do not suffer death as a direct result of their faith.
- The fact that they are seen “beneath” the altar symbolizes that it is the sacrifice of Christ upon the “altar” of the Cross which was their protection and that their prayers rise up like incense to Christ upon the altar. Incidentally, this is why it is NOT wrong or a “Roman Catholic thing” to use incense during the Divine Service. The Christian Church throughout history has used incense because it symbolizes the prayers of God’s people rising up to Him in His House. Also, the OT is filled with examples of incense being used in God’s Holy House (Tabernacle, Temple, Synagogue). Like so many other beautiful customs and traditions, this one has fallen by the wayside because of unsubstantiated and uneducated fears of unknowing Christians who think that the use of incense “smells” of Roman Catholicism (or Eastern Orthodoxy).
- The prayer of these glorified saints is for God to avenge their blood (the fact that they pray proves that they are conscious in heaven, eliminating the “soul sleep” beliefs of some). Christians are not to avenge their own blood, nor is the Church to be a military force on earth (as it was in the Crusades, etc.), for vengeance belongs to God and Him alone. Their blood and the blood of their brothers and sisters in Christ still belonging to the Church Militant on earth cries out for God’s vindication. “How long,” they cry out, “until you make things right, God!” (cf. Ps. 79, Zech. 1:12, et. al.) The saints in heaven (and on earth) long for the Day when God will right all wrongs, punishing all evildoers, and usher in His eternal kingdom in which they will dwell for eternity. They long for the Day when God’s Name will be vindicated and all people will bow before the Throne of Christ.
- In response to their prayer, these glorified saints are donned in glorious white robes, which are distinguished from the white garments (baptismal garments) worn by believers on earth. These white robes show that they are completely holy and righteous, like Christ, having had their sinful natures removed at death. The holiness and righteousness of Christ no longer “covers them” as it did while they lived on earth – it is now theirs in heaven! They can rest in peace until the Day comes when God will answer their prayer to avenge their blood.
- When that Day will come is completely in God’s control (no one knows the Day or Hour, not the angels, nor the saints, nor anyone in all creation, save the Father in heaven). These glorified saints are told that “they should rest yet a little time until the number of their fellow servants and brothers is complete.” In other words, that Day will come only when the last elect person of God has been saved and not one second sooner. When that will occur, again, only the Father in heaven knows. The important point is that that Day will come – God will avenge the blood of His saints on Judgment Day when Christ returns in glory. Thus, the saints in glory and we saints on earth are comforted with the sure and certain fact that the Day is coming when God will make all things right when He sends the victorious Lamb to Judge all people on the Last Day

## **Rev. 6:12-17 – The Opening of the Sixth Seal: “The End of This World and Its Terror**

- The fact that God will answer the prayers of the saints and make all things right by showing forth His glory and their share in it, and by taking vengeance upon His and their enemies, is now shown forth at the opening of the sixth seal. St. John sees a vision of the Last Day here (Judgment Day, that Great and Dreadful Day).
- When the Last Day comes, everyone will know it, for, not only will everyone hear the trumpets of the angels and see Christ coming in the clouds, everyone will witness the earth shaking, the sky falling, the sun and moon changing, the mountains and islands taken away, etc. (cf. Mk. 13:24-27; Mt. 24:29-31; Lk. 21:25-28). The point: You won't miss this event! Also, the fact that all these changes will take place in the cosmos agrees with St. Peter's description that the current heavens and earth will be “dissolved” and a new heaven and earth will emerge in their place (see 2 Pet. 3:12-13; cf. Is. 65:17).
- When Christ returns, He will be revealed to all people as the Ruler over heaven and earth and all things. “Kings” and “great ones” (i.e., those who inflicted tyranny upon people by abusing the power granted them) will now experience real tyranny from the hands of the Almighty One. This will strike great fear in most as they will attempt to flee the impending wrath and hide, but there will no place to run. They will have to stand before the Lamb of God and be judged! The Lamb of God does not bring mercy and forgiveness on this Day, but vengeance and justice, for the day of grace has passed. For the saints, this will be a great and glorious Day, for their blood will be avenged and they will receive their eternal inheritance and enjoy the Great Feast in the glorious kingdom of their Lord. But, for unbelievers, this will be a dreadful, terrible Day, for they will realize too late that Christ is who He claimed to be and they will get the just punishment their sins deserve – an eternity of suffering in Hell.
- This is the first view of the Last Day (end of this world) in Revelation. There are more views of this Day to come. But, before we're introduced to the seventh seal which ushers in the second sevenfold vision, we are shown something beautiful and full of hope and comfort in chapter 7.

**Study and Discussion Questions for Revelation Chapter 6** Chapter Six deals with the topic of persecutions, trials and tribulations on account of faith in Jesus Christ.

1. Have you ever experienced rejection by a friend, or anyone's disapproval because as a Christian you could not go along with them? What happened?
2. How are we able to withstand such subtle persecutions?

3. How frequently do you remember those who are persecuted for their faith in outward ways (as in almost every Islamic country, Cuba, China and Africa) in your prayers?

4. In which situation is it harder to remain faithful to Christ?

A) A time of prosperity and the lure of material goods and comfort, and a general acceptance of many Christian values, but not Christ -- where the issues are not well-known and there is little pressure to be aware of them.

B) A time of poverty, persecution, even death for Jesus' sake. A total rejection of things Christian and Christians. Where knowing the issues is a matter of life or death, eternally.

5. Is it possible that a significantly more open persecution of Christians in the United States is possible in our lifetime?

6. How can a Christian withstand persecution?

7. What Bible passages would be helpful to you in withstanding persecution?

8. When does preparation for persecution begin?