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REVELATION 6

GOD'S JUDGMENTS BEGIN TO UNFOLD – ROUND 1.

In Revelation 4 and 5 with John's vision of the heavenly sanctuary, with the throne of God Almighty in the very centre, we have learned that the One on the throne is always in control. We have also learned that the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, turns out to be the only one worthy to activate the content of the mysterious scroll on the hand of the One seated on the throne.

For that to happen he would have to break the seven seals with which the scroll was sealed. In other words, Jesus Christ alone is able to work out God's master-plan for this world, the plan that leads to punishment for the wicked and redemption for God's people.

Well then, here, in Rev. 6, it begins. All of a sudden the events pick up considerable speed. As the Lamb begins to open the seven seals one by one, we see and hear judgements being issued from God's throne. We see and hear from above things that explain our experiences here below, as we are on our way toward the final victory of Jesus Christ, and the New Jerusalem.

The vision of the seven seals is divided into a block of four, then two that are connected, and then the last one. In this chapter we will look at the four and the two, the first six seals. Between the opening of the sixth and the seventh seal another story is embedded. We will hear about that in Rev. 7. This will

slow down the fast pace of Rev.6, to add a significant view, especially for the church, the believers.

In the meantime, the opening of the first six seals describe events that characterize our world as we move towards the fulfilment, the final unravelling of the purpose of the book. Terrible things are happening. We will see and hear bizarre things in our noisy picture book, that we call Revelation.

But the perspective is that all these things are controlled by the One who sits on the throne, and the Lamb. Behind all this turmoil the Almighty and Holy God is fulfilling and completing his plan of salvation. That is why we don't need to fear in times of trouble, tribulation, anguish and persecution.

DEVASTATING HORSES

It is true, we don't have to fear trouble and persecution. At the same time, what happens when the Lamb of God opens the seals of the scroll, shows us with all kinds of symbols that such times of trouble and tribulation are coming. What John is going to hear must have reminded him of some of the things he had heard from Jesus already. Think, for instance, of what we find in Luke 21.

I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals. That must have been a moment full of suspense for the apostle. We do not use a lot of scrolls nowadays, but usually the contents of a sealed scroll would only be accessible after all the seals were opened. But the drama in our vision is that God's plan begins to unfold immediately with the opening of the first seal.

It is clear that the first four of these seals belong together. The process is the same, and the results show a lot of similarities. They form one block, a devastating quartet that in close cooperation makes the world a scary place to live in. It is not the same for every individual, but we all know it's a broken world full of painful suffering, a world that is groaning under the consequences of sin.

When the first four seals are opened, we are shown four horses and their riders. The group reminds us of Zechariah's first vision. The prophet sees three groups of horsemen returning from a scouting-expedition throughout

the earth (Zechariah 1:7-13). Here it is again God who sends out the horses and their riders to do his work. In Zechariah 1 they reported that *the whole world was at rest and in peace*. Later on, we have to come back to this in connection with the fifth seal.

You may have noticed, when you read Rev. 6, that John alternates again between what he sees and what he hears. He sees seals being opened, and then he hears the four living creatures taking turns in calling up a horse and dispatching it with its rider. They do so in a booming voice as loud as a thunderclap. It is only mentioned with the first one, but there is no reason to believe that the others were whispering.

Four times we hear this loud and powerful command COME! And then we see destruction and disorder, with the four horsemen wreaking havoc on this earth. But the word “come” also connects the opening of the seals with the end of Revelation. There we hear a similar call: “Come... Come, Lord Jesus. That is in Rev. 22.

Within this framework, between these brackets of the word “come”, we may trust that all evil, woes and judgment we encounter today, will be undone in the future, at Christ’s second coming. God will turn it around. The power of these devastating horsemen comes from him. But here already we look forward to the reversal of this disorder when Jesus will come to usher in new heavens and a new earth.

The first horse is white, with its rider holding a bow, a weapon-of-war. He is also wearing a crown, or better, a victory-wreath, that was given to him. His purpose is to conquer, to submit by force. He is *bent on conquest*, says the NIV. The question “who is this rider?” is one of the controversial issues in Revelation. There are different ideas about this, and it seems that one is as good as the other.

Many believe that this rider on the white horse is Christ. They have a number of arguments for this, but the main point is the similarity with another rider on a white horse in Rev. 19. Now, that one is indeed Jesus Christ. The description in 19:11–13 makes that quite obvious.

But one of the differences with 6:2 is that he has a different weapon. The rider in Rev. 19 has *a sharp sword coming out of his mouth* and that we remem-

ber from the vision in Rev.1:16. His conquest, his victory comes through the power of his Word, the testimony of the cross. This rider has a bow.

But the main issue is that the four horsemen really belong together as four devastating powers to execute God's judgments. That is why others state the opposite. They say that this rider is the Antichrist, a devilish parody or caricature of Christ, evil masquerading as good. Does the Bible not warn us that *even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light* (2 Corinthians 11:14)? And he forces submission with his weapon-of-war.

The question is, of course, do we really need to know who this rider is? Do we have to give him a name? We do not do this with the second and third horseman either. They represent certain powers, but as such they are anonymous. Only the fourth one has a name. But we do not have to argue about that, because it's in the text.

I believe that the rider on the white horse represents the aggressive political forces in this world that claim to rule without God, the powers that want to be in control. They want to *conquer*.

Sometimes these powers looks pretty benevolent, but when resisted, or criticized, such a power can quickly turn oppressive, and become a dictatorship that takes away our freedom. It can do so with bloodshed, but also by enforcing an ideology.

In our time you can think of secularism. Such a power will often resist the gospel of Christ, outlaw the Christian faith, and persecute Christians.

The second horse John is seeing is a fiery red one. It has the colour of blood. The rider on this horse was given the power to destroy human harmony, to make people hate each other, to take away peaceful order from the earth. People keep trying, but time and again the human dream of 'world-peace' fails. People keep hoping that eventually we will all get along better and make the world a better and peaceful place. But that also will continue to be a pipedream.

And in personal relationships it is not any better – bitter disagreements, conflicts, angry feuds and fights, it's all too familiar, then here, then there. We can make each other's lives pretty miserable. You would not expect this

among God's children and in the church, but the influence of the rider on the red horse is everywhere!

This horseman has the power *to make men slay one another*. To that end he was also given *a great sword*. He represents the powers of war and warfare. You can think of all kinds of violence and hostilities, or terrorism, or civil war. And when you look around in the world, you will notice that in many of the armed conflicts in this world, Christian believers are often the victims, crushed between the fighting parties.

When Christ opens the third seal, John sees his third horse. It is black, which is, according to some, the colour of hunger. That its rider is holding *a pair of scales* points at the need to carefully distribute the scarce food. John hears a voice explaining the dire consequences of the power of this horseman. *A quart of wheat for a denarius and three quarts of barley for a denarius. A denarius was a day's wages.*

The world will suffer from a terrible scarcity of food. What Ezekiel 4:16 tells us about the situation in Jerusalem, John sees happening all over the world. The average wage of a labourer is barely enough to feed one person. How do you support your family when it becomes so tough to make ends meet? And the prices are outrageous. Wheat would be eight times the normal price, and barley five times.

What about the addition *do not harm the oil and wine*? Some have said that it means there will be an abundant supply of stuff the poor cannot afford. So, only the poor will suffer, while the rich will have plenty to enjoy. But oil and wine were not luxury items in the ancient eastern society, oil was used for cooking and wine was a common drink, in those days much healthier than water.

No, everyone will suffer from the hardships when the economy collapses, often in the wake of oppression, warfare, pandemics, or other disasters. The purpose of the instruction to spare the oil and wine is to tell us in a symbolic way that, for now, God is going to limit what could easily turn into terrible famine. Again, the Holy and Almighty God remains in control of the events.

Then, when the Lamb opens the fourth seal, the fourth living creature summons a fourth horse. Now that is a horrifying sight. It has a gruesome, sickly

colour: pale greenish or greyish. And its rider is the most terrifying of all. This one has a name: *Death*. And his ugly companion *Hades* is trotting right behind him. 'Death' kills and cuts down, and 'Hades' collects the victims and swallows them up.

The grim reaper is making his deadly rounds in this world, killing people through wars, starvation, pandemic diseases, or natural disasters. It happens all the time and all over the world. Yes, he is powerful and frightening. But even the powers of Death and Hades cannot do what they want. Even the powers of Death and Hades are controlled by the One who sits on the throne in heaven.

He sets the boundary. *They were given authority over one-quarter of the earth*. Twenty-five percent is the limit. Later on in the book this will increase: one-third of the earth will be affected by the trumpets in Rev.8, and when the bowls of God's wrath are poured out in Rev.16 the devastation will be unrestricted. This is only round one.

This is our world. You and I read and hear the news every day. We see the terrible woes that plague mankind since the fall into sin. But John's vision helps you to recognize behind the disturbing headlines the power of these devastating horsemen, sent by the One who rules from heaven. Their power characterizes the whole period before Jesus' return. Such things have occurred – are occurring now – and can be expected to occur until that glorious day.

God judges a rebellious world so that people may repent and turn to him. At the same time, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, will use these same events in our lives to teach us to trust in him, to rely on him and to grow in holiness. In the midst of the trials in this world you are cared for, because of his plan for you.

CALLING MARTYRS

And that plan will unfold when the Lamb opens the fifth seal. When that happens the tempo slows down, and the scene changes. The four galloping horsemen who bring destruction and death, disappear out of sight. The scene switches to heaven, where John sees *under the altar the souls of*

those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.

So, John sees an altar in the heavenly sanctuary. Here is the first of eight references to an 'altar' in Revelation. This altar appears to have different functions. It reminds us of both the 'altar of burnt offering' and the 'altar of incense' that stood in the Old Testament tabernacle and temple.

Here this altar is a place of refuge. Throughout the ages Christians have been thrown to the lions, burned at the stake, tortured, massacred, and more. The souls of these martyrs, killed for their faith, found shelter and safety with Christ in the sanctuary in heaven. Here they are waiting for the resurrection of the dead.

It is good not to gloss over the fact that John sees souls. Can you 'see' souls? What do they look like? We have no idea, right? Do the souls of our loved ones, who passed away to be with Christ, do they have any awareness of time or of what's going on with us, here on earth? We tend to say, 'we don't know', and leave it at that.

But here it seems like they have some visible form. They wear clothes! And John also hears them. They can *cry out with a loud voice*. And what they call out, shows that they are fully aware of time, and of what is happening on earth. They also have desires. They are longing for the end. They are looking forward to the day wherein God will do justice and bring all his children safely home.

Some people suggest that what John sees is a vision, so it's all symbolic, it's not real. It is true, of course, that in his vision John sees and hears things you cannot see and hear with physical eyes and ears. But does that mean it is not real?

The souls of the martyrs call out with a loud voice. It is urgent. Remember the report of the horsemen in Zechariah's vision: *...we found that the whole world remains at rest*. There is no sign that salvation is coming soon. Then Zechariah hears the urgent call of the angel: *O LORD of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah* (Zechariah 1:11-12)?

We hear the same urgent tone in the appeal of the martyrs in heaven. *O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our*

blood on those who dwell on the earth? “Those who dwell on the earth” are the people that scorn and defy the holy God and oppose the work of Christ and his church.

Then, just as we hear in Zechariah 1:13 the LORD responding with kind and comforting words, here also John hears and sees, in response to the call of the martyrs, words and images that comfort, encourage, and give hope.

It is true, Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, just as in Luke 23:34 he himself prayed for those who crucified him. But these calling martyrs are not driven by a selfish desire for personal revenge. No, they are longing for the great day that God will set everything straight, eliminate evil, show his justice and reveal his majesty and holiness.

What John sees and hears are the martyrs in heaven. But they express the same desire as the faithful believers, the suffering church on earth. That makes this “How long?” a crucial question for John’s whole book, and thus for us today.

How long does the church in heaven and on earth have to wait until God fully overcomes all evil and injustice in the world? How long do we have to wait before the way of the cross is vindicated in our lives, and in the eyes of those who today ridicule the way of the cross?

God’s answer is twofold. *They were each given a white robe.* This is a sign of purity, righteousness, and holiness through communion with Christ in heaven. We see the same in Rev. 3:5 and 7:14. That is encouraging, but it does not answer the question.

Then they were told *to rest a little longer.* Their prayers will be heard. But not yet. The day has not yet come, but it will come in God’s time. All their fellow-servants have to be brought in first. God alone knows the exact number, and it is not yet complete. That is why delaying his full wrath now, serves the complete wrap-up of the gathering of Christ’s church in the time to come.

The flipside of this patience that God shows, is that there will also be more victims of persecution: *brothers who were to be killed as they themselves had been!* This is where we find ourselves today. Together with our brothers and sisters in heaven we are to wait. But as we are waiting and as the church con-

tinues to suffer, we may know this: all the things we are dealing with here and now are within God's grand plan.

This is his way of winning the victory over evil. Do not worry, eventually all injustice will be avenged and punished. And eventually all brokenness will be healed. That is a promise! In Rev. 16:5, 6 and 18:20 the outcry of the martyrs is being answered. Yes, at this point we all have to wait a little longer. But the delay is coming to an end, for, as it says in 12:12, *Satan knows that his time is short.*

FRIGHTENING CALAMITIES

God will hear the prayer of the souls in heaven. And when it comes, his wrath on those who dwell on the earth will be terrible indeed. The opening of the sixth seal triggers lots of frightening calamities. The cosmos joins the earth in disasters that shake the very fabric of the created order. John sees how the dread and horror of what is happening comes about in two ways, a crashing universe and a terrified mankind.

It starts with a great earthquake. In the Bible this is often an indication that God is coming as Judge. And here it is also the visible sign that the present world order is fractured beyond repair. In the end all human structures, all human accomplishments, all human pride that ignores God, it all comes crashing down.

And then the sun turns black, the moon turns blood red, and the stars fall out of the sky. The whole universe is out of joint. In Genesis 1:14 we read that on the fourth day of the creation-week God put the sun, the moon, and the stars in the expanse of the sky *to give light upon the earth.* But when his world, filled with moral and spiritual decay, is dissolving into chaos, God turns off the lights. Enough is enough. There will be nothing left but icy cold and frightening darkness.

And then the sky itself recedes like a scroll. It curls up like a piece of paper. Yes, even mountains and islands, emblems of what is solid and immovable, they are uprooted, just like that; moved out of place and thrown around by the enormous powers mobilized by God. The holy and almighty God begins to undo his creation. He is going to tear down and demolish his old world.

Try to visualize what John saw and you can imagine the picture of dread and despair, confusion and consternation that we have in v.15 and 16. The opening of the sixth seal shows us the terror on the day of wrath for the wicked. It shows how those who reject the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and refuse to repent will experience God's judgement. It scares the living daylight out of them, all of them!

Verse 15 lists six categories:

the kings of the earth: the supreme political rulers, prime ministers and presidents;

the great ones: other public figures and power-brokers in the world;

the generals: the military leaders;

the rich: the wealthy businessmen and economic leaders;

the powerful: the men and women, the celebrities who influence our culture through science, arts, entertainment, sports, education, the media, and you name it;

And finally *everyone* – free or slave.

In the face of God's judgment those distinctions become irrelevant. From the lofty to the lowly, no one will escape the cosmic collapse. When the whole world falls apart everyone is equal. John sees the entire godless world terror-stricken. They all recognize who is coming, and like Adam and Eve after the fall, they can only think of fleeing and hiding from the wrath of God Almighty on the throne and of the Lamb.

Is this the last Judgment? It sure looks like it, sounds like it and feels like it! And so, we think it is! However, it is not the end! Not yet! The seventh seal is still coming. And that will open up another cycle of disasters, when angels sound the seven trumpets, a second round of judgments is coming!

But for the people it sure feels like 'this is the end'. For them the fear, the panic, the despair are very real. And in one last desperate attempt to hide, they call on rocks and mountains to protect them. They would rather be crushed under rocks or mountains and nowhere to be found, than having to face the

Almighty God. They would rather be buried alive, than have Jesus set his eyes like blazing fire on them.

And in their deep despair they cry out another key-question of Revelation: Who can stand on the great day of the wrath of the Almighty God and the Lamb?

Who can stand on the day that the just anger of God turns against the evil and corruption that has spread on earth? Are we all doomed to destruction?

The apostle John will hear and see the answer.

In the meantime, in a world slated for demolition and urgently in need of messianic repair, here are the two desperate questions everyone needs to answer:

“Who can stand in the Judgment?”

And the other one, in contrast with this: “How long, O Lord, until you judge?”

Which of these questions is yours? What fills your heart when you look around?

The despair that leads you to Jesus Christ to find hope?

Or the despair that leads you to be afraid and horrified?

If you do **not** flee **to** Jesus Christ, you **will** have to flee **from** him.

But there is no place to hide.

there a connection, and if so, what kind of connection between this universal choir and how we worship God and sing to the praise of his glory?

3. The content of the scroll in Revelation 5 is an outline of God's judgment and salvation as these unfold in the last days, the time between Jesus' 1st and 2nd coming. In the visions of the rest of the book Christ is opening the seals one by one, and every time new things are happening. Can we look at current events in the world today and determine at which one of the seals (or trumpets or bowls) we are right now? Why or why not?
4. Why can we say that Revelation 5 is the key to understanding the whole book?

Chapter 12 – Revelation 6

1. What is the best way to explain the things we (and all people throughout the world) experience in light of what we read about the impact of the four horsemen and their activities in the verses 2 – 8? And what is the double purpose of those activities?
2. When the apostle John is given these visions he is *in the Spirit* and he can see and hear things he could not have seen and heard normally, with his physical eyes and ears. Does that mean that what he sees and hears is not real? Is there a difference – and if so, what would be the difference – between a dream and a vision?
3. People have different ideas as to what heaven looks like and how they imagine the souls of believers live on together with Christ in heaven. How does what we read in verses 10 and 11 help you to form an idea about this?
4. Verse 12 mentions a *great earthquake*. Where else in Scripture do you find references to great earthquakes as manifestation of God acting as Judge?

Chapter 13 – Revelation 7:1 – 8:5

1. Read Ezekiel 9. What would be the connection between this chapter and what we read in Revelation 7 about *sealing the servants of God on their foreheads*?