

GOD'S FAITHFUL JUDGMENT

Lesson 4

Revelation 6 and 8:1–5



WELCOME

Think back to when you were a child. What did you imagine God looked like or was like? Who or what influenced your perception of Him?

INTRODUCTION

In Revelation 5, Jesus, the Lamb of God, was found worthy to open the seven seals. In **Revelation 6** and **8:1–5**, those seals are opened and very sobering judgments are revealed.

Tips for meaningful engagement with the Word:

- Chapters 6–16 of Revelation elaborate on the scroll that was introduced in chapter 5.¹ These chapters contain three series of seven judgments:² seven seal judgments (**Revelation 6; 8:5**), seven trumpet judgments (**8:6–11:19**) and seven bowl judgments (**15:1–16:21**). Rather than a linear timeline, the seal, trumpet and bowl judgments of Revelation can be seen as a series of dramatized scenes. These visions are not one long continuous drama, but are more like brief scenes following one another. Some of these scenes may portray the same events from different angles. Ultimately, they produce an overall story, culminating with the end of history.

¹ Barton, 69

² These three series of seven (seals, trumpets and bowls) have been viewed in several different ways. The Recapitulation View sees the three sets of judgments as different ways to view the same judgments. The Consecutive View sees them as 21 chronological events. The Progressive Intensification View sees them as different perspectives on the same judgments with each perspective increasing in intensity and ending in the same place—the end of history. (Barton, 69-70)

- True to its apocalyptic nature, the visions in these Scriptures (**Revelation 6; 8:1–5**) include symbolic use of animals,³ numbers and colors.⁴
- Revelation 7 is a dramatic interlude⁵ between the 6th and 7th seals. The contents of Revelation 7 will not be studied until lesson 9 in part two of this study.
- This lesson is broken into four sections: seals 1-4, seal 5, seal 6 and seal 7, with questions in between. The verse numbers have been removed from the Scripture passages and footnotes have been inserted. These footnotes are intended to help clarify the passage and provide better understanding.



WORD

As you come to the Word, pause and ask God to make it come alive for you. Ask Him to make it understandable and transformational.



Revelation 6:1–8⁶

“As I watched, the Lamb broke the first of the seven seals on the scroll.⁷ Then I heard one of the four living beings say with a voice like thunder, ‘Come!’⁸ I looked up and saw

³ A modern parallel to apocalyptic symbolism could be the political cartoon, “in which nations or their leaders are represented as animals (the eagle for the United States or the dragon for China).” (Ryken, 481)

⁴ Ryken, 480

⁵ In a play or a concert, an interlude is a transitional moment for audiences to catch their breath between the acts—an opportunity to recalibrate and refocus on the bigger picture. (Green) Interludes in Revelation take a break from what is happening to refocus on God’s people before returning to the original train of thought. (Duvall, 119)

⁶ The first four seals are grouped together in a series of judgments known as the four horsemen. Evidence suggests that these judgments run simultaneously throughout history rather than being specific events in history. These four judgments show how God allows the natural consequences of the depravity of humanity to run its course with self-destructive results. (Duvall, 107-108)

⁷ In the first century, a seal was a sign of authority and ownership. Documents were not necessarily sealed to prevent their contents from being known, but so that only the one authorized by the author could open them. Jesus Christ, the slain Lamb, is authorized to break the seals. (Johnson, 168)

⁸ Scholars are not in full agreement about who the four living beings are calling to “come.” (Johnson, 169-170) However, one widely accepted perspective is that the call is for the horsemen to come. (Gaebelein, 472)

a white horse standing there. Its rider carried a bow,⁹ and a crown was placed on his head.¹⁰ He rode out to win many battles and gain the victory.”

“When the Lamb broke the second seal, I heard the second living being say, ‘Come!’ Then another horse appeared, a red one.¹¹ Its rider was given a mighty sword and the authority to take peace from the earth. And there was war and slaughter everywhere.”

“When the Lamb broke the third seal, I heard the third living being say, ‘Come!’ I looked up and saw a black horse,¹² and its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard a voice from among the four living beings say, ‘A loaf of wheat bread or three loaves of barley will cost a day’s pay. And don’t waste the olive oil and wine.’”¹³

“When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the fourth living being say, ‘Come!’ I looked up and saw a horse whose color was pale green.¹⁴ Its rider was named Death, and his companion was the Grave. These two were given authority over one-fourth of the earth,¹⁵ to kill with the sword and famine and disease and wild animals.”¹⁶

⁹ The white horse symbolizes conquest, and its rider carries a bow, a symbol of military power. The image of this horse and rider speaks to the human lust for war and conquest. (Duvall, 108)

¹⁰ The passive wording “was placed” indicates that the rider’s ability to conquer was given to him. Though it is not clear who placed the crown on his head, the broader context points to the fact that the rider was allowed to conquer. However, ultimately “nothing lies outside God’s eternal sovereignty.” (Fee, 93)

¹¹ The red horse symbolizes warfare or violence resulting in bloodshed. (Duvall, 108) Violence and bloodshed are a natural progression resulting from man’s lust for conquest, which generates strife and war. (Johnson, 171)

¹² The black horse is generally thought to represent famine. Famine was a normal result of ancient warfare, as invading armies used up resources when they lived off the lands they were conquering. (Mounce, 155)

¹³ There are many different points of historical speculation about the meaning of these statements with no real consensus among scholars. One common perspective is that these statements point to economic and social inequality, with greed and injustice leading to hunger and famine. (Johnson, 172; *Illustrated Study Bible*, 2350)

¹⁴ “In the ancient world, pale green was the color for depicting a corpse.” (*Illustrated Study Bible*, 2350)

¹⁵ That one-fourth of the earth was affected in this vision is not quantitative; rather, it is symbolic, indicating that the devastation and judgment is large, but not complete. (Mounce, 156; Fee, 95) God is still limiting His judgment. (Barton, 74)

¹⁶ The four ways Death and Hades killed humankind in this vision were similar to the four ways that were depicted in Ezekiel’s vision (**Ezekiel 14:12–23**). “Death by wild beasts ... would be expected in a land decimated by war and famine.” (Mounce, 156)

4. John's vision of the first four seals depict the natural consequences of the sin of humanity. The human ambition to conquer others leads to war and violence, resulting in famine, injustices of all sorts and death.

While it is easy to condemn the most grotesque forms of these sins, we are all sinners and are tempted by the ambition to "win" or to "come out on top" in life, even at the expense of others. James wrote about the consequences of sinful attempts to get our own way in

James 4:1–3:

"What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure."

How is God speaking to you about the consequences of sinful attitudes or actions in your life? How might your sin cause violence, famine or injustice toward those around you?



Revelation 6:9–11¹⁷

“When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of all who had been martyred¹⁸ for the word of God and for being faithful in their testimony. They shouted to the Lord and said, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you judge the people who belong to this world and avenge our blood for what they have done to us?’¹⁹ Then a white robe²⁰ was given to each of them. And they were told to rest a little longer until the full number of their brothers and sisters—their fellow servants of Jesus who were to be martyred—had joined them.”²¹

5. The martyrs’ cry, “How long?” has been a cry of believers throughout history as they have felt the strain of waiting for God’s help in situations they would not have chosen. Think of a time in your life when your prayers have echoed the cry, “How long?”
What have you learned in the process of waiting for God’s response?

¹⁷ The 5th and 6th seals depict two key groups of people: the followers of the Lamb and those who belong to the world. These seals reveal how both groups of people interact with the One who sits on the throne and the Lamb. (Fee, 96)

¹⁸ The altar in Revelation “seems to unite the themes of sacrifice and prayer.” (Duvall, 114) Though we will not all be killed for our faith, the sacrificial suffering of all God’s people is honored by God.

¹⁹ The idea of appealing to God for vengeance may feel foreign to our western way of thinking. It could sound self-serving. But the foundation for this cry for justice is founded on God’s inherent holiness and trustworthiness—that He will not allow evil and injustice to carry on without consequence. (Fee, 98) The cry for justice follows the pattern of the “Prayers for Vengeance” found in the Psalms: **Psalm 6:3; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; and 137.** (*Illustrated Study Bible*, 2350)

²⁰ In the book of Revelation, white robes are symbols of blessedness and purity. (Mounce, 160)

²¹ The idea of a predetermined number of martyrs appears in Jewish tradition. (Duvall, 115) Only God knows how many Christians will be martyred. (*Illustrated Study Bible*, 2350) Some scholars believe that God is not waiting for a certain number to be killed, but that He is waiting for the appointed time to arrive when He will vindicate His people. (Barton, 76)



Revelation 6:12–17

"I watched as the Lamb broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake. The sun became as dark as black cloth, and the moon became as red as blood. Then the stars of the sky fell to the earth like green figs falling from a tree shaken by a strong wind. The sky was rolled up like a scroll, and all of the mountains and islands were moved from their places."²²

Then everyone—the kings of the earth, the rulers, the generals, the wealthy, the powerful, and every slave and free person²³—all hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. And they cried to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one who sits on the throne and from the wrath²⁴ of the Lamb. For the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to survive?'"²⁵

6. This vision contains a paradox. The faithful Lamb, whose sacrifice secures salvation, is also pouring out His wrath on those who do not accept Him.²⁶ What troubles you about this picture of the Lamb? What do you find encouraging?

²² These cataclysmic signs are associated throughout Scripture with the Day of the Lord, when God's judgment will overturn the whole created order (**Isaiah 13:4–12, 34:1–4; Joel 2:1–32; Zephaniah 2:1–3; Mark 13:1–37**). (*Illustrated Study Bible*, 2351)

²³ Note that there are seven groups of people mentioned. Given the symbolic significance of the number seven, what is being communicated is the comprehensiveness of the coming judgment. (Duvall, 115)

²⁴ Those who have resisted God's merciful offer of salvation are now facing His terrifying wrath. They fear His wrath more than death itself. They attempt to hide, and they plead for a violent death rather than having to face Him. (Duvall, 115)

²⁵ The answer to their question is "no one"—no one can possibly survive the wrath of God except through the protection and provision of God Himself (Revelation 7). (Duvall, 115)

²⁶ "The wrath of God is not an emotion that flares up from time to time as though God has temper tantrums; it is a way of describing his absolute enmity against all wrong and his coming to set matters right." (Rutledge, 130)



Revelation 8:1–5²⁷

“When the Lamb broke the seventh seal on the scroll, there was silence throughout heaven²⁸ for about half an hour. I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and they were given seven trumpets.²⁹ Then another angel with a gold incense burner came and stood at the altar. And a great amount of incense was given to him to mix with the prayers of God’s people as an offering on the gold altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, mixed with the prayers of God’s holy people, ascended up to God³⁰ from the altar where the angel had poured them out. Then the angel filled the incense burner with fire from the altar and threw it down upon the earth;³¹ and thunder crashed, lightning flashed, and there was a terrible earthquake.”³²

7. What does the image of believers’ prayers saved in an incense burner and thrown down to earth mean to you?

²⁷ The final seal stands alone, revealing silence in the heavens and the shaking of the earth.

²⁸ “Some have suggested that this silence is so that the prayers of the suffering saints on earth can be heard. However, most likely, this is the silence of breathless expectancy, as all of heaven waited for the hand of God to move.” (Barton, 91)

²⁹ The angels with trumpets indicate more judgment to come.

³⁰ “The mixture of incense and prayers that reaches God’s presence shows that God hears [the prayers of His people] and is prepared to act.” (*Illustrated Study Bible*, 2352)

³¹ The hurling of the incense burner to earth indicates a direct response to the prayers of God’s people. (Fee, 121)

³² Like the visible manifestation of God at Mt. Sinai (**Exodus 19:16**), the world trembles at the manifest presence of God. (Mounce, 183)

8. Prayer does not need to be wordy or eloquent—though it might be. The prayer that rises to God as a fragrant offering (**Ephesians 5:1–2**) may be one word, or it may be too difficult to even express in words. Maybe your prayer is a guttural groan, a tear, a song of praise or a deep sigh.

Take a moment to pay attention to the genuine prayer of your heart right now. Offer that prayer to God as a sacrificial offering, knowing that He hears you and will act on your behalf in His time.



WORSHIP

Take a moment to enter into a time of worship—both on your own and with your community—to show praise, adoration and love for God.

After the prayers of the believers had been heard, there was a moment of breathless anticipation as all of heaven awaited God’s response. That pause is reminiscent of the words of the Old Testament prophets:

“The LORD is in His holy Temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him.”³³

“Be silent before the LORD, all humanity, for He is springing into action from His holy dwelling.”³⁴

As your act of worship, take a couple of minutes to practice the silence of holy anticipation that arises from the confident assurance that your faithful God hears your prayers and is poised to act on your behalf. You could start your time of silence by saying this prayer:

God, I believe that You hear me, and I wait for You to act in your time...

³³ **Habakkuk 2:20**

³⁴ **Zechariah 2:13**



WITNESS

Believers are called to reflect Christ in the world. This section will help you engage with how to be a witness—reflecting Christ—this week.

The destructive patterns of human sin examined in the first half of Revelation 6 permeate our world. But our confidence is not in the systems of the world; it is in our holy, true, trustworthy and faithful God.

Write down a verse(s) that has helped or could help grow your confidence in God and His faithfulness this week. Meditate on it, allowing it to settle deep into your soul so that you can confidently believe in God's faithfulness and reflect that confidence to others.

Consider sharing your verse with someone in your life to encourage their confidence in the Lord.

