***Revelation Chapter 6, Verses 9-17***

**Introduction**

In Revelation 6 we are told a part of a story about events being revealed and enacted by the breaking of the set of seals. Six of these seven seals are opened and revealed in chapter 6 which includes

* the four horsemen of the apocalypse,
* the alter of souls and
* the judgement of God.
* Ultimately, we find that the seventh seal is not revealed until we get to chapter 8

This chapter covers events that began in chapter 4 and end later in the book and we are simply looking at a snapshot within a story here in chapter 6.

I think that a some things that will be helpful to interpretation is to consider

* The immediate context in the book.
* The importance of the context of prophetic tradition,
* The significance of different types of symbolic expression

I think, and hope, that you will see how these things contribute to our understanding of Revelation Chapter 6 and particularly that 5th and 6th seals that we will study this evening. So, the first let’s consider

* where we are in the book,
* how it fits into the structure and
* what it informs us about regarding the verses we’re going to study.

In the first chapter of Revelation, John explained that he saw a vision of Christ, and John assures his readers in verses 1-3 that the things revealed to them must soon take place, and that anyone who read that Revelation would be blessed. Shortly thereafter in chapters 2 and 3, Jesus gave John messages to write to the seven churches of Asia Minor, and these messages collectively prompted the churches being persecuted by the Roman government to be pure through their tribulation. Many of the letters comforted the churches by indicating that their persecution would only be for a definite time. However, there were no hopeful indication in the letters that an immediate end to this persecution was coming. In other words, this book is a call for endurance, which is a very important thing to notice in our study this evening as it relates to the opening of the 5th seal. It would be necessary for these brethren to demonstrate their steadfastness as they experienced the trials that were yet to come. So, the point of the book is to encourage the churches to be steadfast and to endure through tribulation. Please keep this in mind as we consider the opening of the 5th seal this evening. I think that it will make it much easier to understand what is being conveyed. The churches of Asia minor were undoubtedly concerned then, ….and hoping to know something about how to handle the forthcoming difficulties.

Starting in chapter 4, a new unit of action in John’s vision began, which gave them some of these answers.

*Re 4:1 ¶ After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, "Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this."*

After the vision of the letters, John would be beaconed into heaven where he was promised to be shown something. Whatever he was about to be shown was to be that which would take place after this. Which I believe would be things that would take place after these churches received their letters, what they should expect in the coming days of tribulation. In short, the visions would reveal and enact God’s plan for the future of the church. And we will find that these visions covered both immediate and distant fields of time. In short, chapter 4 begins a new story in the book of Revelation and importantly, I believe the story largely describes what would happen to the people of God, As opposed to the story that begins in chapter 12 which seems to describe how or by what agency the church would come to be persecuted before Christ’s final victory. Both of these stories help the church to understand that

* God’s promises from the letters in chapters 1-3 would be fulfilled, and
* that God is reliable even if the church seemed to be facing opposition.

I’m going to use a term that should be obvious to anyone who knows me, is not mine. Chapters 4 and 5 reveal a new sort of what I understand is called a “dramatis persona” or a new cast of characters with new settings for the drama that was taking place in the prophetic vision. Reoccurring characters that we need to keep in mind for this first vision include God the Father, the 24 elders, the four living creatures and very importantly the Lamb. In the vision God permitted a strong angel to advance a challenge for someone to open the book that was held in his hand, but no one was able to do so until the Lamb, who represents Christ, came forth and took the book from the hand of God. So, at the end of chapter 5, we’re eagerly awaiting to discover the contents of that book which would tell about God’s plans for the future of the church.

Chapter 6 tells the story, as we had previously mentioned, of the Lamb removing 6 of the 7 seals which bound this book together, and based on the construction of ancient scrolls, each broken seal would loose new pages from the book and reveal a new segment of information.

As mentioned earlier, we also need to remain aware of the context of prophetic tradition. So, before diving into the details of Revelation Chapter 6, I would like to remind everyone that many of the seals from Revelation rely on imagery which was already familiar to the church, and is most likely the reason why there is not a significant amount of time dedicated to explaining it in the book. These images can largely be found in Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah. I’m sure that Brother Lyndon illuded to some of these in his study of the first fours seals found in the first 8 verses of chapter 6

I won’t go further into a study of the first four seals as this is something that our Brother Lyndon Cox has already presented prior to the Labor Day meeting.

***Our Study***

1. Chapter 6:9-11 – The Opening of the (5) Fifth Seal
2. Chapter 6:12-14 – The Opening of the Sixth (6) Seal
3. Chapter 6:15-17 – Man’s Response to the opening of the 6th Seal

**Re 6:9 ¶ And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: 10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? 11 And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should** **rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.**

**13. Why were the souls under the fifth seal slain? Verse 9.**

First of all, I think that we need to make note of the picture that is painted for us here. When the 5th seal is broken, we immediately are told of and altar. If I understand others who are scholars as it relates to the original language, the word for altar relates to a place of sacrifice. (Strongs 2379).

Summers, points out that the symbolism changes at the fifth seal. He explains that up to this point we have observed the means of judgment; we now see before us the reason for judgement. Certainly, that would fit with the context or what is being pictured at the opening of the 5th seal. Underneath the altar are the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held. Scholars differ in terms of who might be included in the souls that are pictured beneath the altar, but regardless of who all might be included over the course of history, this group surely would included those that lost their lives under the Roman rule of Domitian.

From what we can tell of what the Apostle John says, even though he wasn’t executed for this same reason these souls were martyred, it was most likely the reason that he had been exiled to the Island ofPatmos. The apostle John is characterized in Chapter 1 and verse 2 as being one *who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ*

*Revelation 1:9¶ I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.*

*In the time of this writing, it was demanded that people worship Domitian as if he were a God. My understanding is that there were many that remained faithful in who they were and Whom it was that they served. They proclaimed the word of God and remained steadfast in their convictions. As a result, their physical lives were taken from them. Verse 9 says that they were slain for* it. *As we read in chapter 20:4, there were at least some that were beheaded for their convictions.*

*Re 20:4 And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were* ***beheaded*** *for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image*

*One of these martyrs was mentioned by name in as is related in the letter to Pergamas,*

*Revelation 2:13 I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein* ***Antipas*** *was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.*

So well stated in Matthew 10:28 it expresses this very idea. *And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*

For those of us who have never faced such persecution as to make a choice between life and obedience, this might seem to be an easy thing to read and understand. But those to which this was written faced the reality of it.

They were soundly grounded in the word of God and in their faithful obedience to it. For this, their physical lives were taken from them and they became Martyrs for the cause of Christ.

Even in Revelation 2:10 the church in Smyrna was told, *“Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.*

There is a Golden altar of incense is mentioned in chapters 8 and 9 as it related to the prayers of the saints – and we may have a little more to say about these before we finish our study this evening.

*Re 3:5 "He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.*

The souls beneath the altar in the opening of the fifth seal are spoken of as having been given white robes that they should rest while brethren that yet lived would continue to struggle and who would also eventually join them in their place of rest.

Re 12:17 also speaks of war being made against those that would keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

**14. How can we reconcile the demand for vengeance with the Christian spirit? Verse 10.**

*There are those that have been concerned with the souls underneath the altar and their demand for vengeance…whether or not this was reflective of a Christian spirit.* I don’t know that we have to make some great struggle out of this question unless there is something that is escaping my notice or attention, except that there are those, that I might refer to as enemies to the cause of Christ that would have Revelation excluded from canonized scripture for it. Some commentators spend a lot of time focusing on whether or not the cry of these martyrs, if you will, properly displays a Christian attitude in that it is a cry for vengeance. I think that the scriptures bare out that this is a reasonable expectation that the Lord will avenge those who have given themselves in service to Him. It’s not some well kept secret. The only thing that is mentions by commentators that might be construed as a non-Christian attitude is the impatience that seems to be displayed. The question then for me becomes, why would these martyred souls who had been redeemed and passed from this life into a state of peace, comfort and rest; clothed in robes of white - be wrapped up in an impatient cry for vengeance? I think that Albertus Pieters in his book “The Lamb, the Woman and the Dragon” explains this well when he says, “these souls were under the altar which was the place where the blood of slain victims was poured out. He explains that it is the sacrificial blood that cried out for vengeance. He then gives an example found in

*Ge 4:9 ¶ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" 10 And He said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground. 11 "So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. 12 "When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth."*

*I’d like to make a couple of points with regard to this question. Not the least of which is that there will be a time in which we will reap the reward of our deeds.*

*Ro 12:19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.*

*De 32:43 Rejoice, O ye nations, with his people: for he will avenge the blood of his servants, and will render vengeance to his adversaries, and will be merciful unto his land, and to his people.*

*Ps 79:10 Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is their God? let him be known among the heathen in our sight by the revenging of the blood of thy servants which is shed.*

*Lu 18:7 And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them?*

**15. Why were the saints to rest for a little while? Verse 11.**

What I am afraid that we may miss is that this is not about the souls of those who have been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held, so much that it is for those who would yet give their lives. That is who this is written to and are the immediate audience. It is an enchoragement that they will be granted peace, rest and comfort if they would remain faithful even if it would cost them their physical lives. The other message is that this is not yet a point at which time has been pronounced to be no more. Those who were yet living had not been forgotten, but are intended to be encouraged to remain faithful, for time would continue to march on for now. The souls beneath the altar were given robes of white and told that they should rest for a little while because there were yet brethren and fellow servants that should give their lives in their committed service for the Lord.

**THE SIXTH SEAL**

**12 And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo,**

* **there was a great earthquake; and**
* **the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and**
* **the moon became as blood; 13**
* **And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. 14**
* **And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.**

The sixth seal has been a very perplexing thing to me. It places us in a conundrum of making the decision as to how to properly determine the structure of the remaining portion of the book. When the sixth seal was opened, John saw a great earthquake, with all its accompanying horrors.

The swift agony of being crushed to death was preferable to being left face to face with an angry God and seems to be commonly related to other instances of this wording that we’ll talk about just a little bit before we are finished.

Summers expresses two views relating to the opening of this seal. One of them says that this is the final judgement, but if so, then it appears to occur at the wrong place. The seventh seal isn’t addressed until the 8th chapter, and we just finished studying about the fifth seal which tells martyred souls that the needed to **rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.** To tell them to be patient and to wait, and then immediate do that for which they had been calling, or crying for, would seem a little pointless.Finally, the 7th chapter provides something of an interlude. A time period as Summers puts it when God’s protective and possessive seal would be placed on the foreheads of God’s true people. Perhaps, this was the time, or the little season, during which God’s vengeance would be held back waiting for those that are mentioned in the 5th seal. We are told in Chapter 7 that 4 winds, which symbolize God’s devine retribution are being held back.

*Re 7:3 Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads.*

*Re 8:1 ¶ And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour. 2 And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets. 3 And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. 4 And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand. 5 And the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar, and cast it into the earth: and there were voices, and thunderings, and lightnings, and an earthquake. 6 And the seven angels which had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound. 7 ¶ The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth: and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up. 8 And the second angel sounded, and as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea: and the third part of the sea became blood; 9 And the third part of the creatures which were in the sea, and had life, died; and the third part of the ships were destroyed. 10 And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; 11 And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter. 12 And the fourth angel sounded, and the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars; so as the third part of them was darkened, and the day shone not for a third part of it, and the night likewise. 13 And I beheld, and heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice, Woe, woe, woe, to the inhabiters of the earth by reason of the other voices of the trumpet of the three angels, which are yet to sound!*

*(KJV)*

**16. From similar pictures in the Old Testament, what do you think the opening of the sixth seal indicates? Verses 12-13. (See Isaiah 13:10-13 and Isaiah 29:6)**

**Notes: Sixth Seal, The sun became black as sackcloth of hair the moon became as blood (Revelation 6:12), Isaiah 13:10, Jeremiah 4:28, Joel 2:31, Matthew 24:29, Acts 2:20, Revelation 8:12, Revelation 9:2, Revelation 16:8-9**

**Stars Fall (Revelation 6:13), Isaiah 34:4, Mark 13:25**

*I’m going to be brief about this one. With each of the emblems mentioned in this verse, something that seemed constant and reliable failed to operate in the expected manor. Or put more simply what seemed impossible was going to happen. So mountains and hills often refer to governments or formal human powers. The prophetic plague of the sixth seal seems to regard turmoil among the political powers which resulted in hardships for the saints. Whatever, the specific timeframe that these verses refer to, it has to do with the end of some ruling power that is hurting the church. So whether that is the final day of judgment or whether that is the fall of the Roman Empire, its hopeful, its for the purpose of expressing relief.*

*Isa 13:10 For the stars of heaven and their constellations Will not give their light; The sun will be darkened in its going forth, And the moon will not cause its light to shine. 11 "I will punish the world for its evil, And the wicked for their iniquity; I will halt the arrogance of the proud, And will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible. 12 I will make a mortal more rare than fine gold, A man more than the golden wedge of Ophir. 13 Therefore I will shake the heavens, And the earth will move out of her place, In the wrath of the LORD of hosts And in the day of His fierce anger.*

*Isa 29:6 You will be punished by the LORD of hosts With thunder and earthquake and great noise, With storm and tempest And the flame of devouring fire.*

**17. How do we know this picture does not represent the final judgment? Verses 12-13.**

The seventh seal isn’t opened until Revelation chapter 8.

**Notes: The heaven departs as a scroll when it is rolled together (Revelation 6:14), Isaiah 34:4**

**Mountains moved out of their places (Revelation 6:14), Isaiah 13:13, Nahum 1:5, Zechariah 14:4, Revelation 1:9, Matthew 24:35**

**18. If the crashing world, earth-shaking events, and darkness enveloping wicked people depicts judgment and destruction of the power responsible for the death of the saints, what power would that be? Verses 12-14.**

**15 And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; 16 And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb:**

**Notes: All categories of men (Revelation 6:15), Revelation 13:16, Revelation 19:18**

**The hide in dens and rocks of the mountains (Revelation 6:15), Judges 6:2, I Samuel 13:6, Isaiah 2:10, Isaiah 2:19-21, Luke 23:29-31**

**19. To what does the description of men seeking refuge in caves and rocks and calling for mountains to fall on them in other passages refer? Verses 15-16. (See Hosea 10:8, Isaiah 2:19, and Luke 23:30)**

*Hosea 10:8 (the tribulation that Israelites would endure at the hands of foreign nations because of their sin) - Also the high places of Aven, the sin of Israel, Shall be destroyed. The thorn and thistle shall grow on their altars; They shall say to the mountains, "Cover us!" And to the hills, "Fall on us!"*

*Luke 23:30 (The Crucifixion Scene, and prophecy regarding the destruction of Jerusalem) - "Then they will begin 'to say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!"'*

Each of these prophetic sayings demonstrate that crying out to the mountains and hills was an abstract icon referring to the experiences of complete hopelessness and loss in response to a threat. In Revelation 6, there may be different opinions about this, and I think that is okay, that we’ll ultimately come to the same doctrinal conclusions. But I believe that in Revelation 6 this phrase refers to the persecutions of the Roman Empire; one of several comings or judgments mentioned in the New Testament. For examples of this concept at work in other places we might look at Revelation 2:16 or Matthew 10:23

*Mt 10:23 "When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.*

So here we have a reference to the coming of Christ, but not necessarily the final judgement day. I also find it interesting that many comentators attribute human governments to mountains and hills and although I haven’t thoroughly studied these icons, I think that the mountains as earthly powers interpretation fits Hosea and Luke both fairly well. That people plea for protection or mercy from governments who were going to violently conquer them and give them no mercy as Christ might if they would simply turn to Him.

**17 For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?**

**20. Do you think the wrath of God and the Lamb is the personal attitude of God toward sinners or an impersonal process of retribution working itself out in the course of history? Verse 17.**

**21. Do you think the early saints may have needed some assurance that they would not be overwhelmed with the rest?**

I believe that the choices we make in interpreting the seals can mark our direction for interpreting many other elements in the book of Revelation. So, I hope that I have brought evidence to support the notion that the seals represent the Romans as a mighty, but ultimately temporary empire that would be able to persecute the church for just a definite amount of time.

The interpretation that I have presented is in my opinion is the most desirable interpretation for at least 2 reasons that I would like to share with you. First is that the interpretations views the seals in relationship to each other demonstrating how they work together to present one overarching image with one overarching message. The second is that this interpretation essentially creates a set of bookends for the two major vision presented to John in this book. The first vision begins by using the seals to demonstrate the downfall of a pseudo empire while the ending of the second vision ending in Revelation 19 conveys the triumph of the eternal kingdom of Christ.