

Revelation

*Part Nineteen
How Long, O Lord?
(Revelation 6:9-17)*

With Study Questions

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*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
212-6999
pastorpaul@branchofhope.org
www.branchofhope.org
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How Long, O Lord?

(Revelation 6:9-17)

When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been 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, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" ¹¹ Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both *the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were*, was completed. ¹² I looked when He opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. ¹³ And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. ¹⁴ Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place. ¹⁵ And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves 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 who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!" ¹⁷ For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand" (Revelation 6:9-17)?

Introduction

At the risk of sounding chippy, I will, when I find myself in a class or on a tour where the teacher or guide continually refers to BC (before Christ) and AD (anno Domini or year of the Lord) as BCE (before common era) and CE (common era) ask a question. I will ask, 'did something significant happen which caused us to separate these two eras?'

We can use new terms to seek to deemphasize it, but the entire earth throughout the entire course of the last two millennia, has determined the very date of humanity based upon the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. It should astonish us that, as it has been poetically

conveyed, that *One Solitary Life* could have such an impact upon the human race.

One solitary life of a middle eastern man born in obscurity to relatively poor parents. He never wrote a book, held an office, went to college, led an army or did anything we would normally associate with greatness. In His early thirties He was abandoned by His best friends, put through a ridiculous trial, was executed and buried in a borrowed grave. Yet He has become the central figure of all humanity. No individual, no nation, no army, no generation has had the effect upon humanity that we see coming from Jesus of Nazareth.

Wherever one travels in the world, the very date universally used is based upon how He changed the course of human history. The world has always designated this BC and AD. But those who know Christ and have been fed by His word recognize this as the transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant.

I open with this, as we examine the opening of the fifth and sixth seals, because I fear we underestimate the explosive and cataclysmic nature of the changing of the ages. All the world has come to recognize that a change has occurred. Yet modern eschatological prognosticators, with almost a slight of hand (not necessarily intentional), have us looking forward in anticipation of what Christ will do, rather than back at what Christ has done.

The words of institution in the Lord's Supper contain a call to "**remember**". No doubt, the Second Coming, Judgment Day and the Final Resurrection are objects/events of great hope for the Christian. But only because of what Christ has already done. Not because of what He will do (Hebrews 9:28).

We're like spoiled children raised in a nice house *paid off* by our parents. Yet we are lamenting because the house needs repairs; that it's not the house it once was (in the fifties). Instead of working on the (already paid off) house, we're waiting for mom and dad to somehow buy it again or finish the work they failed to complete. People/Christians think things won't be sorted out until the Second Coming. As if Jesus has more work to do.

If I may push the metaphor, what we learn with the opening of these two seals (really, all the seals) is that the paid off house (the Kingdom of God) was established, but in a bad neighborhood. Certainly, this bad neighborhood during the time of Christ would include the entire world (1

John 5:19), but especially the religious persecution coming from Jerusalem (Revelation 11:8) and the political oppression coming from Rome (Revelation 17:9). In the breaking of these seals, Jesus is dealing with the bad neighborhood.

Please allow me another metaphor, for the sake of clarity. In the Old Covenant, God revealed Himself through one nation, Israel (Romans 9:4, 5). In the New Covenant God would send His people to **“all the nations” (Matthew 28:19)**. I liken this to a firework. With Israel (Old Covenant), the firework was a thin line (one nation) of light in a dark sky. But in the New Covenant (the church-many nations) that thin line explodes and begins to give light to the entire sky. And *explosion* is an apt word.

When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been 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, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”¹¹ Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both *the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed (Revelation 6:9-11).*

It should not be a mystery to any Christian that our brothers and sisters, during the first century, were the victims of severe persecution, **“killed all day long”** as Paul would write, **“sheep for the slaughter” (Romans 8:36)**. Jesus was born into a hostile environment and foretold that same hostility would be directed toward His followers (John 1:11; Matthew 10:24).

What we see in this passage is that those who had been slain are calling for justice. That they are **“under the altar”** depicts the sacrifice they were willing to make for their faith. They had been **“slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held.”** It wasn't as if the Word of God was somehow held at a distance. It was the truth of God's word and the fact that they kept talking about it that resulted in their death. They are crying that God would **“avenge”** their blood. We should not view this as coming from some evil, malevolent, vindictive or spiteful spirit. It is an appeal to God for justice.

Somehow it has crept into Christian thinking that it is very Christian of us to allow evil to go unchecked (often a misunderstanding of turning

the cheek, giving your cloak or going the extra mile, from the Sermon on the Mount-as if abuse and theft should be ignored). But Christians are called to be active in delivering victims from oppression (Proverbs 12:6; 24:11).

Justice is an attribute of God (Psalm 89:14) which must be pursued. Sometimes God avenges through the civil authorities (Romans 12:19-13:4). Sometimes God avenges through supernatural or cosmic intervention, as with Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24) and sometimes God avenges through nations-even evil nations (Isaiah 10:5). These martyred saints, which may have included Antipas (Revelation 2:13), were engaged in prayer to God toward this justice. Of their prayers, David S. Clark wrote,

It would seem to them, and naturally, that truth was being destroyed; the church killed; and everything that was just and right was being outraged, and the people of God suffering as if God had forgotten. So, they pray: How long, O Lord, how long?¹

It is not a prayer uncommon Scripture (Psalm 13:1-6; 35:17; 74:9; Habakkuk 1:2). When horrible things are happening, we should work and pray that these things would stop. To be sure, there are limits regarding what we can, and should, do. And we should never malevolent or maliciously vindictive. But neither should we be idle. These saints are praying.

These martyred saints are given both good news and bad news. They are each given a **“white robe.”** A white robe would be a sign of their justification, that they had peace with God through the blood of Christ. We should ever read Revelation with our eyes on this central feature, that apart from the blood of Christ, there is no true victory in heaven or on the earth. At the same time, it is often through great tribulation that the kingdom of God is entered (Acts 14:22).

We learn in the second half of verse eleven that the severe tribulation surrounding these first century Christians would continue for a time. That these martyred are told to **“rest”** speaks to a disposition of contentment in the providence of God, even in the midst of tragedy. If we too are clothed in Christ, that contentment is belongs to us as well.

¹ Clark, David S., The Message from Patmos. Page 56.

I looked when He opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. ¹³ And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. ¹⁴ Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place. ¹⁵ And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves 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 who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! ¹⁷ For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand” (Revelation 6:9-17)?

Inevitably, when trying to explain how the vast majority of the Revelation is addressing the conflicts of the first century church, a collective ‘when did this happen?’ surfaces in the conversation. Understandably, people think this must be the end of the world. The sun becomes black, the moon becomes like blood, stars fall to the earth. That simply has not happened, so people suggest, so it must be future.

My premillennial, futurist brothers, in their commentaries are quick to the newspapers and intelligence reports. This, they suggest, is a first century man trying to explain nuclear bombs, cobalt bombs, fractional orbital bombs, apache helicopters, etc.

Before being quick to the newspapers, we should be quick to the Old Testament, if we truly wish to understand this language. This is very familiar scriptural, apocalyptic imagery. To be clear, there will be a Judgment Day at the end of history. There will be a full consummation of a New Heavens and New Earth. But this passage is not addressing that (other than the recognition of how a near prophecy of judgment suggests and teaches of the remote). If this is the complete breakup of the cosmic system, how could hiding in the mountains help?

What does the Old Testament teach us regarding references to:

- Earthquakes
- A blackened sun
- A moon becoming like blood
- Falling stars

- Heaven rolled up like a scroll
- Islands and mountains being moved
- Men hiding themselves in cave and calling for rocks to fall on them
- A day of God's vengeance and wrath, where none can stand

Time prohibits going in minute detail on all of these cosmic disturbances (often called *decreation*). Suffice it to say (along with just a few examples) that all of this language is used in the Old Testament to describe God using one nation (or sometimes locusts or other natural phenomena) to judge another nation.

The darkening of the sun, moon and stars are used in Isaiah 13:10 to describe God stirring up the Medes (Isaiah 13:17) in their destruction of Babylon. Similar language is used in Ezekiel 32:2, 7, 8, 16, 18 for the destruction Egypt. Melting mountains and the heavens **“rolled up like a scroll” (Isaiah 34:3, 4)** is imagery used to describe the destruction of Edom (likely by the Assyrian armies), as is **“the day of the Lord's vengeance” (Isaiah 34:8)**. We see similar language of calling mountains to **“Fall on us” (Hosea 10:8)**. The use of the **“bow”** and the extinguishing of the sun and moon is also found in Habakkuk 3:9-12, where it is clearly the military invasion of Judah by the Chaldeans.

Hopefully we begin to see the point. None of this Old Testament language is used in reference to the final Judgment, but to God's judgments in history-usually nation against nation. Our current massive error, held by so many Christians, regarding the moral, spiritual, economic, etc., trajectory of history happens when we seek to interpret Scripture through the lens of a newspaper rather than through the lens of Scripture itself. The *analogia de fide*-let Scripture interpret Scripture.

What we are actually reading in these accounts is not the anticipation of the downward trajectory of human history, but the stemming of evil in the first century that the Kingdom of God may advance. At the risk of taking on too much, let's take a brief look at what Jesus born into, and what the New Testament says about what would happen to His detractors.

That He came to His own and His own did not receive Him (John 1:11) was not a mere social shunning. The powers in control tried to kill Him at His birth (Matthew 2). The nation of Jerusalem, which should have been proclaiming truth and life, was more evil than the most evil nations recorded in Scripture. Jesus, referencing these ungodly nations, taught that

these evil nations, had they seen what the current Israelites had seen, would have repented. Their judgment, therefore, would be worse than Tyre, Sidon and Sodom (Matthew 11:21-24).

It is little wonder that, after a scathing denunciation of the clergy in Jerusalem, Jesus declares...

...that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. ³⁶ Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation (Matthew 23:35, 36).

It is **“this generation”** *ten genean* (the generation to whom Jesus was speaking) that will bear the judgment of all the righteous blood shed on the earth. It is in the midst of the Olivet Discourse (the very next chapter) where Jesus is speaking of the sun, moon, stars, etc. that He repeats the indictment, along with its timing.

Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place (Matthew 24:34).

It is in reference to the same historical event (when Jerusalem is surrounded by armies) that Jesus says,

For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled (Luke 21:22).

When His own people cried out **“Let Him be crucified,”** and Pilate sought to excuse himself from guilt, those same people answered,

His blood *be* on us and on our children (Matthew 27:25).

In that same conversation, Pilate asked **“Shall I crucify your king?”** It is here that we see one of the earliest examples of taking the mark of the beast.

The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15)!

It was in anticipation of this horrible judgment that Jesus turned toward those who were mourning and lamenting and said,

Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, 'Blessed *are* the barren, wombs that never bore, and breasts which never nursed!' ³⁰ Then they will begin 'to say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us" (Luke 23:28-30)!

All of these words, all of this imagery is applied to what would happen to Jerusalem within a generation of Christ, when the temple was destroyed, and Jerusalem sieged by Rome.

But rather than obeying Christ, they would call for the rocks and mountains to fall on them. Proverbs 8:36 tells us that all who hate God love death. How hard the human heart can be! The natural man's response to debt is further indebtedness. The same place they sought to hide became the place they called upon for self-destruction.

In stark contrast to these cosmic disturbances-these things that can be shaken, the author of Hebrews offers the glorious alternative.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. ²⁹ For our God *is* a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:28, 29).

The final cry is "**who is able to stand?**" The implied answer to this rhetorical question is, of course, no one! Yet there is a means by which we can stand. And let us finish with that.

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God (Romans 5:1, 2).

Questions for Study

1. How could it be that One Solitary Life could change the course of human history? Discuss to what extent Christians should look forward to what Christ will do and/or look back at what Christ has done (pages 2, 3).
2. Contrast the Old and New Covenants. How are they similar? How are they different (pages 3, 4)?
3. Is it right or wrong to pray that God would avenge His children? What are the means by which God brings justice? Explain your answers (pages 4, 5).
4. What does it mean to have a “white robe?” Is this true of you (page 5)?
5. What is the danger of interpreting the Bible through the lens of a newspaper? How should we seek to understand Scripture (pages 6, 7)?
6. How are we to understand the language of cosmic disturbance or decreation (pages 6, 7)?
7. Discuss what Jesus was born into and what would happen to His detractors? Is it accurate or a mistake to conclude that God has decreed a downward trajectory for the spiritual and moral condition of humanity (pages 7-9)?
8. How can anyone stand before a righteous and holy God (page 9)?