

Revelation 6:12-17 presents us with a picture of the end of the world. The Bible makes it clear that history as we know it will come to an end. It makes it clear that the transition between the present order and coming order will be sudden and dramatic. It makes it clear that it will involve the wrath of God against all who have not submitted to Jesus. This passage focuses two things: It describes how dramatic the end will be and the fear of those who refused to submit to the rule of God and embrace his salvation - fear because of the wrath of the Lamb – the wrath of Jesus Christ.

These are not the most pleasant of subjects to consider. It is much more pleasant to focus on the love of God in Christ and on his willingness to save sinners. And that is in the background here. The primary recipients of this passage are believers in Jesus. We are not mentioned in the text, but it is addressed to us. And it is intended for our comfort and encouragement. Certainly, it is important to see it also as a call to be ready for the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

There are many passages in the Bible that make that call explicitly. But in the context its explicit purpose is encouragement. It is God's answer to the prayers of the souls in heaven recorded in the preceding paragraph. We looked at that last week. The souls in heaven are praying, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Our text today is part of the answer to that prayer. Our text today is part of God's answer to the prayers of the church for the coming of the kingdom of God and the defeat of evil.

Some of the comforts in the Bible for the people of God are difficult to take comfort from. What is described in these verses is not something that we naturally look forward to. The first part of the paragraph describes the dissolution of the creation – a great earthquake, the sun goes dark, the moon like blood, the stars falling from the sky, the sky rolled up like a scroll, the mountains and islands tossed about like pebbles.

Earthquakes are terrifying. Probably most of us have never experienced an earthquake, but we have heard of them. We have seen the pictures of the devastation. And we can imagine to some extent what it would be like. How weak and helpless we are before the devastating power of an earthquake! We feel pretty secure from earthquakes in our part of the world, but this earthquake will shake the whole creation.

Imagine the sun doing dark or the moon the color of blood. Imagine the stars falling from the sky and the sky itself being rolled up like a scroll. Imagine the mountains and the islands flying through the air and landing in some other place.

Don't worry about the scientific questions these descriptions raise. Don't concern yourself with wondering how the moon can have light while the sun is dark. Don't ask how stars can fall to the earth. Don't consider these images in the light of the laws of nature. This describes the undoing of the laws of nature. We do not know how much of this is literal and how much of it is symbolic. Whatever it will look like literally, this passage is true. This is a picture of uncreation. It is a picture of the dissolution of the creation. Behind this picture is the

power and the majesty of God. The creation displays the glory and power of God. The undoing of the creation will also show the glory and the power of God.

The shaking of things that seem unshakeable reveal something of the holiness and majesty of God. When God came down on Mount Sinai to give the Ten Commandments, we are told that “the whole mountain trembled greatly” (Exodus 19:18). Hebrews 12:26 says, “At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’”

That is what Revelation 6:12-14 is describing. Behind it is the awesome greatness of God. This picture is also about his wrath. Every one of these images is found in OT in passages that describe the wrath of God. Joel 2:31 “The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.” Psalm 18:7 “Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry.”

Isaiah 34:2 & 4, “For the LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction..., All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.”

This picture in Revelation 6:12-14 shows how the wrath of God will be manifested at the end of the age. It belongs to his plan for the end of history, but it is also in answer to the prayers of the saints for God to judge and avenge their blood. It is also included here in the book of Revelation for the comfort and encouragement of the people of God.

But how can that be? How can there be any comfort in the light of the unraveling of the whole creation? How can there be any comfort when the creation is being undone – when it is being uncreated – when the order of the creation becomes chaos – when there is no solid ground on which to stand anywhere in the created order. The only possible comfort in the face of the undoing of the cosmos is in God himself because he is above and beyond the cosmos. Reality is made up of God and the creation. There is the uncreated and eternal God and there is the creation which depends on God for its existence. If the creation is dissolved the only place of stability and safety is God himself. The only safe place is a supernatural place – a place that is above and beyond the present created order.

Let’s think of this in the light of some of the earlier verses of the book of Revelation. It is addressed to the seven churches of Asia which represent all the churches. And these churches are addressed with these words: “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loved us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever Amen.”

Chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation contain both warnings and encouragements addressed to the churches. The church is warned against compromise and complacency and worldliness and called to faithfulness and repentance and endurance in the face of temptations and trials. And there are promises to those who conquer – to those who endure – to those who remain faithful to the end. The messages to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 make it clear that faithfulness to Jesus in the face of difficulties is necessary, but many promises are given to those who do so. What this means must be understood in the light of the gospel of grace and peace – in the light of the message that believers are freed from their sins by Jesus' blood and empowered in their endurance by the Holy Spirit.

Closer to our passage is the picture of the souls in heaven in the preceding paragraph. It is a picture of those who have been faithful unto death. It is a picture of believers who have gone through the valley of the shadow of death and have entered into the joys of heaven. They are at rest. And they are told to rest a little longer until the number of their fellow believers are killed as they themselves had been.

That passage gives us a view of the death of believers from the perspective of heaven. It reflects the good news that for believers, death is not the end, but an advance in the fulfillment of their salvation. And so believers can view the description of the undoing of the creation knowing that life on earth is temporary and death is their entrance into glory. Their security is not tied to this creation as it exists. As Peter puts it in 1 Peter 1:4, believers have "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for [them]." The created order is not imperishable as our text makes clear. But believer's inheritance is.

Believers have been taught to sing, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea...." (Psalm 46)

It is a sobering reality that is described when the sixth seal is opened. The fact that we know that this is how this present age will end gives the present time a serious character. This is what the world is heading towards. Things will not always continue as they have from the beginning of creation. This present order of things is temporary. It is heading towards what is described in Revelation 6:12-14. The created order will be undone. The stars will fall from the sky. The sky will be rolled up like a scroll. We live in the light of this end of life as we know it. And Peter tells us in 2 Peter 3:11 "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought [we] to be in lives of holiness and godliness...."

It means that we are to value things in the light of eternity. We are not to be overly attached to things that will not make it through the undoing of the creation. We are to live conscious of the fact that "the present form of this world is passing away." We are to treat temporary things, as temporary things. In the light of the coming destruction of the created order, we are to prioritize our relationship with God and view everything else in the light of our relationship with God. That does not mean that this earthly life is irrelevant and meaningless. It means that it is temporary and must be lived in the light of that. What matters is serving God in our everyday

life. Holiness and godliness are not, disengaging in this earthly life; they are living all of life to the glory of God. They are having God at the center of our everyday lives and not having our everyday lives in the center and God at the periphery.

It also means making our calling and election sure. The Bible makes it clear that not everyone who thinks that he or she is saved is truly saved. Hebrews 4:1 says, "Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it." Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Paul warns, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves."

This picture of the end of the world is a warning to us to make sure that it is well with our souls – through trusting in Jesus, through submitting to his Lordship, through submitting to his word. Jesus says that many will seek to enter in but will not be able. We need to take those warnings seriously. Not everyone who claims to be a Christian is truly a Christian. James warns us that faith without works is dead. John tells us that we know that we know him if we keep his commandments. Hebrews insists that without holiness no one will see the Lord.

We are to live our lives in the light of the end of the world that is described in these verses. There is a way we can be safe so that we do not need to fear even the cosmic undoing of the created order. It is the way of trusting in Jesus that results in following Jesus in obedience and service and giving our lives for him. It means taking the Christian life seriously. It means walking the hard way that leads to life rather than the easy way that leads to destruction.

So in the first part of this paragraph we have a description of the dissolution of the created order. And we have considered how this is a comfort for Christian, but also how we are called to live soberly in the light of it.

We move on now to consider the second part of this paragraph, verses 15-17, "Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone slaves and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'"

In some of the articles on how the pandemic affects different kinds of people, two kinds of comments are made, both of which contain some truth albeit in different ways. On the one hand, it is sometimes said that the virus is no respecter of persons – that anyone can get it, whether you are rich or poor, whether you are strong or weak. There is some truth to that. The rich and the powerful are not immune that is for sure. Boris Johnson got it. People in the White House got it. But that is not the whole truth because many more poor people get it than rich people. And the old and the weak are particularly vulnerable.

Revelation 6:15-17 stresses that the wrath of God at the end of the age will be poured out upon the rich and the powerful as well as the poor and the insignificant from a this-worldly perspective. The kings, great ones,

the generals, the rich, the powerful, as well as everyone else, slave and free – the wrath of God is truly no respecter of persons. All who have rejected Jesus will face the wrath of God. The rich and powerful will not escape because they were rich and powerful. The poor and weak will not escape because they were poor and weak. What will matter then is how they responded to God and not whether they were rich or poor.

It is however significant that the list here contains more terms referring to the high and mighty than the poor and weak. The kings of earth are mentioned – the great ones, the generals, the rich and the powerful – five terms referring to the high and mighty – two terms referring to poor and weak – slaves and free. That corresponds to Jesus' teaching in the gospels that, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25).

Power and riches are very difficult to handle well. The result of that is that fewer rich and powerful people are saved. That is why our text which describes the fear of the lost on the day of God's wrath has five terms for the rich and powerful and two terms for all the rest. Power is extremely difficult for sinful human beings to exercise justly. The saying that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely reflects this reality. The best political systems in the world are those with checks and balances so that no one has absolute power. When you have absolute power you end up with a North Korea. In most of the political systems in poorer countries there is so much corruption that governments are dysfunctional. In the best political systems in the world, corruption is still a massive problem. Sinful man is unable to handle power well.

And the same is true of riches. It is very difficult for sinful people to handle riches well. 1 Timothy 6:9 says, "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." Riches are not evil in themselves, but they are dangerous, and we see that reflected in our text when it is expressly mentioned that the rich will experience terror on the day of God's wrath. That does not mean that there are no rich people among God's people. The Bible has plenty examples of rich people who were faithful people of God. But it is clear that many rich people do succumb to the temptation to live for their riches.

The implications of all this for us is that that we must focus on being poor in spirit. It is that we prayerfully fight against the temptations that come with affluence and prosperity. The key here is prioritizing Christian character – love and humility and awareness of our dependence upon God. It is fighting against the temptations to materialism and other forms of worldliness. It is realizing that there is a danger to the affluence that we enjoy and taking that danger seriously.

The description of the terror of the lost on the day of God's wrath is disturbing. In the vision that John described they "hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'"

It is a description of terror. It is a description of horror. There is a longing for a hiding place – for some barrier between themselves and the wrath of God. The language is striking. It paints a moving picture. It is designed to make an impression. It is designed to be memorable. It is not something that we like to think about. But it is in the word of God and we must think about it. This is reality. This is the truth.

Those who defy God and do not repent will one day experience the terror that is described in these verses. Those who hate and persecute God's people and do not repent will one day experience the terror that is described in these verses. There will be a great reversal on that day. The followers of Jesus are considered weak and foolish and on the wrong side of history. The people of the world are admired and respected. But that will change on the great day of the wrath of God.

The wrath of the Lamb is a striking image. The ideas of a lamb and wrath do not fit together. Lambs are cute and cuddly and weak. Wrath suggests power and authority. It is fearsome. The combination of the two heightens the intensity of the wrath. This is the lamb who was slain. This is the lamb who was crucified by the world in its hatred of God. This is the lamb who gave his life for the world. This is the lamb who has given everything and has been rejected by many. His sacrifice has been despised. His offer of reconciliation has been refused. His people have been persecuted. This lamb is no longer dead. He is alive. He is all-powerful.

Revelations 5:6 describes him as "a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth." He was dead, but he is now alive. He was weak, but now he has seven horns. Seven is the number of fullness – of completeness. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him."

And he is wrathful. The Bible does not hesitate to speak of wrath in connection with Jesus. Jesus spoke more about hell than any other figure in the Bible. Paul in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8 speaks of a day when "the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." The world makes fun of hell and brimstone preaching. And it can be done in a way that does not reflect the balance of Scripture. But it is part of the message. It is a significant part of the message. It is part of God's word to the human race. We are called to flee the wrath to come. The glory of God includes his wrath against sin. The salvation of the world includes God's justice upon the wicked.

But it is the background to the good news. The Bible is about the good news in the light of the bad news. The most important truth about the terrible things that are described in these verses is that they are not inevitable for all who hear the gospel. We are all worthy of experiencing the wrath of the Lamb, but there is a way of escape which is rooted in the same Lamb. He is the Lamb who was slain. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one who sent his disciples into all the world with the message of reconciliation through faith in his name.

The words of our text are first of all addressed to the church. This belongs to the coming of God's kingdom. This belongs to the victory that Jesus Christ has won. This is a necessary part of the implementation of our salvation. The other side of this picture is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord."

What is described in our text and what is described in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 will happen simultaneously. As we consider the frightening picture that our text paints, we consider it as those who have received salvation in Christ. The horror of the consequences of not being in Christ, impresses upon us the necessity of testing the authenticity of our faith. But we can have a well founded assurance of our salvation according to the NT and while it warns against self-deception it does not describe the people of God as being uncertain of their salvation in Christ. Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:18, just after describing the return of the Lord and his meeting with the saints in the air said, "Therefore encourage one another with these words."

But at the same time, this sobering description of the day of God's wrath should remind us of the urgency of the task of bringing the gospel to the lost. As we contemplate this picture of the terror of the lost on the day of God's wrath let us be renewed in our zeal to fulfill the great commission so that as many as possible may be among those who are spared that awful end and experience instead the day of the Lord as a day of rejoicing in Christ rather than a day of terror.