

I said in the sermon last week that I wanted to preach a whole sermon on the idea of the judgment of God in the light of the current pandemic. It is going to be more than one. This passage is a good place to begin.

This passage which describes what happens when the Lamb opens the first four seals is an example of many passages in the book of Revelation that have to do with God's judgments upon the wicked.

One thing that should keep in mind right off the bat is the fact that we who believe in Jesus are no less hell-worthy than anyone else on this planet. As Paul reminds us in Ephesians 2:3, before God rescued us by "the immeasurable riches of his grace", we were "children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." Any attitude that has even a hint of superiority to others is profoundly sinful and dishonoring to God and harmful to our witness. If we are now not under the righteous wrath of God against our sins it is only and wholly because of God's mysterious and unfathomable grace in Jesus Christ. We richly deserve to be, and the Bible goes out of its way to impress upon us as people of God that God's choice of us as absolutely nothing to do with any superiority or worthiness in us.

A key passage here is 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 where Paul says to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 1:26–29, "²⁶For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." In order to think rightly about the judgment of God upon the wicked we must seek the grace of true God-given humility so that we think with the awareness of how utterly we deserve the wrath of God because of our sins – both before and after conversion.

With this in mind let's look at these verses. Verses 1-2, "Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, Come! And I looked, and behold a white horse! And its rider had a bow and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer." The key point is that nothing happens until the Lamb opens the seals. The background is chapter 5 which introduces us to the scroll of God's plan that will culminate in the new heavens and the new earth. There we learn that the Lamb, who is Jesus, was worthy to take the scroll and open the seals because he had conquered through dying. The picture that chapter 5 leaves us with is the Lamb with the scroll in his hand and the whole church and the whole created order worshipping him. The rest of the book is about what happens when the Lamb opens the seals of the scroll by which he implements God's plan for the salvation of his people and his world and what we see in many places in the book of Revelation is that that plan involves a lot of suffering for the inhabitants of the world including the people of God.

Some people think that the rider on the white horse is Christ because later on in the book of Revelation, towards the end, there is a rider on a white horse who is clearly identified as Christ, but that does not fit with

this context. The four horses in chapter 6:1-8 refer to aspects of suffering on the earth. Christ here is the Lamb who opens the seals. He is not the rider on any of these horses.

It is not necessary to spend a lot of time analyzing the particularities of each horse and the awful things their riders unleash on the world. The white horse with its rider represents the reality of wars of conquest. The red horse with its rider represents conflict and hostility and killing. "Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth...." The black horse and its rider represent famine. "A quart of wheat for a denarius and three quarts of barley for a denarius." A denarius was a day's pay for a working man. Food is expensive. It takes most of what people make to survive. The significance of the command not to harm the oil and wine is not clear. It may refer to the fact that the rich are often less affected than the poor in a time of famine. Oil and wine were more luxury items rather than necessities. One of the realities of the suffering in the world is that the poor often suffer more than the rich.

And the pale horse represents death. "And I looked and behold a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth." I read that one because it is closest to what we are going through at the moment – a pestilence which is causing a lot of deaths all around the world.

Now in interpreting these there are a number of things to keep in mind. It's the overall picture that matters not all the details. What these verses are speaking about is the reality of wars of aggression, conflict and killing, famine and disasters of various kinds that result in many deaths. This is a highly symbolic way of saying what Jesus said literally in Luke 21:10-11, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences."

These first four seals are not chronological in their fulfillment. They are chronological in their description because Jesus opens the first four seals in sequence. But the intent is not to say that these things will happen in any specific order. This is a symbolic picture of what will happen on earth during the entire period between the first and second comings of Christ. This symbolic picture does not mean that it will be only this all the time, but rather that throughout this period there will be wars and bloodshed and famines and pestilences. And sometimes they will be on a very large scale. Verse 8 says that Death and Hades were given authority over a fourth of the earth.

This is what life has been like throughout the world in the whole period since the ascension of Christ into heaven and it will continue to be this way until his return. Later on we will see that these things will intensify as we get closer to the end. So there have been relatively quiet periods in different places in the last two thousand years, but there has also be an awful lot of suffering due to wars and violence and hatred and famines and earthquakes and epidemics and pandemics. We only need to think of the twentieth century and the first part of the twenty-first century for many examples. The current pandemic is part of the picture that Revelation 6:1-8 draws.

But what does all this mean? That is the question that we will consider in the rest of this sermon. Answering this question from this passage will help us to think biblically about the significance of this pandemic we are facing.

First we will consider the purpose of this passage itself which must be seen in the light of chapter 5. It is addressed to the people of God. It is intended to comfort and strengthen them as they experience the things described in these verses. There is no question both from a biblical and an observational perspective that the people of God are not spared the suffering described in these verses. God's people have suffered along with those who reject God in the wars and famines and pestilences that have frequently been experienced by the human race throughout the centuries. This passage is addressed to God's people to give them perspective in these situations.

And the most significant point of the passage is that none of this happens apart from the Lamb opening the seals of the scroll of God's plan for the world which is his plan for the salvation of his people and his world. That is the most significant perspective of all from this passage. These things, including the current pandemic is part of God's plan for the coming of his kingdom.

And, further, the point of chapter 5 must be emphasized that Jesus is worthy to be the one in control of opening the scroll because of his death on the cross. The death of Jesus for the sins of his people is the key to the plan of God for the salvation of the world and so the fact that it is the Lamb who has the scroll in his hand and opens the seals of the scroll means that what happens as the scroll is unrolled is the plan of salvation that is rooted in Jesus' death.

That is something that this passage along with its connection to chapter 5 is telling us. The Lamb is our Saviour. He is the one who died for us. And what the scroll represents is the unfolding of the salvation that he has accomplished by his death and resurrection. That salvation can also be described as the coming of the kingdom of God and that helps us to see that that salvation rooted in Christ's death includes the overthrow of evil as well as the deliverance from evil. Here is how Gregory Beale expresses this idea in his commentary. "[I]n connection with ch. 5, Revelation 6:1-8 describe the operation of the destructive forces that were unleashed immediately on the world as a result of Christ's victorious suffering at the cross, his resurrection and his ascent to a position of rule at his Father's right hand." P. 371.

A huge point of this passage is that the calamities described in our text are the result of Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension into heaven. That means that the pandemic we are experiencing is rooted in the cross of Christ. It is part of the outworking of God's plan of salvation which is always two-sided: salvation from sin and the punishment of sin. And this is intended to comfort and strengthen the people of God. It is our Saviour who opens the seals of the scroll. This is the outworking of our salvation, which includes the salvation of the creation, which also includes Christ's victory over the forces of evil in the world.

So there is certainly an aspect of punishment of the wicked here. It is more than that and we must understand it in the light of all that the Bible says about this, but there is no question that these calamities including the current pandemic are expressions of God's wrath against the unrepentant world. This is made explicit later on in the book of Revelation. As we will see as we proceed, there are three cycles of these calamities on the earth described in the book of Revelation. The first cycle is the opening of the seven seals. The second cycle is the sounding of seven trumpets and the third cycle is the pouring out of seven bowls. These cycles are concurrent. They all speak of the same thing except there is an intensification as we move through the cycles. But they are all basically saying the same thing. And here is the way that the seven bowls are introduced in chapter 15:7, "And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever...." At least part of the meaning of the calamities is the wrath of God against the unrepentant.

And this is the consensus among bible believing scholars concerning the meaning of the seals. Part of their meaning is that they are expressions of the wrath of God against the unrepentant wicked and precursors of the ultimate punishment against the unrepentant wicked at the end of the age.

However, the meaning is not unmitigated wrath. These disasters and calamities that occur throughout history and before the end of the age are also expressions of God's mercy and his desire for the salvation of sinners. 2 Peter 3:9 tells us that one of the reasons that the Lord delays the end of the age is that he "is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." This verse and many others reflect God's desire that people will repent and come to Jesus for salvation. That is behind the great commission whereby God sends his people into all the world to make disciples of all nations. What this means is that the calamities that happen before the return of Christ are powerful and urgent calls to repentance. They certainly express the wrath of God against sin, but a huge part of the purpose of that message is a call to repentance. It is a warning of what is to come for those who do not repent.

Four times in the later chapters in the book of Revelation there is reference to those who did not repent. That indicates that one of the great purposes of the calamities that occur as Jesus opens the seals of the scroll is warning people to flee the wrath to come and calling them to repentance. They serve the same purpose as the ministry of John the Baptist who warned people to repent because the kingdom of God was near. That is what the calamities unleashed when Jesus opens the seals also mean. They are a call to unbelievers to acknowledge the God of heaven and repent of their sins and turn to Jesus. While these things are going on, the church is under command from the same Christ to be preaching the gospel of salvation to the whole world.

So when we think of the current pandemic, there is no question that it is an expression of the wrath of God against the sin of the world. But that expression of wrath is a warning which is motivated by mercy. This pandemic is the result of Jesus opening the seals on the scroll of God's plan, but also part of that plan is that Jesus has sent his church into the world of the pandemic to interpret it for the people. We should not

interpret the pandemic in isolation from the great commission. God has sent the pandemic, but along with it he has sent the church into the world to tell the world what the pandemic means.

It means that God takes sin very seriously. But it also means that God is giving people a wakeup call – a warning – a very strong reinforcement of the call to repent. The pandemic is like an exclamation point to emphasize the gospel message. The pandemic and the great commission are meant to be understood together and the moment Jesus decides that the church's work is done, Jesus will open the sixth seal and instead of a pandemic the entire cosmos will unravel and the wrath of the Lamb will be poured out in all its fullness upon those who persisted in refusing to repent and receive the salvation that he died to offer to them.

Another point that this passage makes is that the disasters that it describes are not directly caused by Jesus, but allowed to happen. That is not to say that God never directly causes punishment, but much of the time disasters are the result of Jesus allowing sin to take its natural destructive course. In these first 8 verses of chapter 6, Jesus opens the seals of the scroll. Nothing happens until Jesus opens the seals. But what happens when the seals are opened is that the riders of the horses are given permission to do their destructive thing. The rider of the white horse "was given" a crown. The rider of the bright red horse "was permitted to take peace from the earth" and "he was given a great sword." In connection with the pale horse, Death and Hades "were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth."

What this means is that at least one of the ways of biblically looking at disasters and calamities is that God allows sin and its consequences to take their course. There is mystery here because of texts like Matthew 10:28 which says that no even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from our Father. But the relationship between God and the things that happen on earth is diverse so that sometimes the Bible will speak of God causing something to happen, while other time it will speak of him allowing things to happen. This again is part of the mysterious relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. But in the case of Revelation 6:1-8, Jesus opening these first four seals results in him allowing either sinners directly or the creation under the curse to unleash their destructive forces.

So one of the points in this passage is the destructiveness of sin. Much of the time God restrains sin and its consequences to permit humans to live relatively peaceful and prosperous lives. But then sometimes God allows the destructive forces of sin and the curse to be less restrained so that the destructive horror of sin is experienced in a more powerful way. So you end up with wars and all the other ways that people hurt other people. Sometimes they are more restrained, but sometimes they are less restrained, and you end up with wars and terrorism and murder and oppression. And sometimes the destructive forces of a world under the curse are allowed to work their destruction in greater ways than normal and so you have things like this pandemic. The way it is framed in this passage is that the Lamb opens the seal and Death and Hades are given authority over a fourth of the earth to kill. This is more along the lines of Christ allowing the world under the

curse of sin to reek its destructive force on humanity. A deadly virus is part of the natural order of the creation under the curse of sin and when Jesus opens the seal it is given permission to spread through the human race and bring sickness and death to many.

The point of this is to show what a horrible and destructive thing sin is. This is a powerful and graphic demonstration of the fact that the wages of sin is death. This helps us to see sin for what it is. And behind sin is the devil who is malicious and cruel. In all of the disasters and calamities that are described in Revelation 6:1-8 we are given to see that sin is not some harmless forbidden pleasure. Sin is the most dangerous and the most destructive force in the universe and when Jesus opens a seal on the scroll we are given a glimpse of that truth.

But it is the Lamb who opens the seals. The scroll that is unrolled as the seals are broken is the plan of salvation that is rooted in the death and resurrection of the Lamb. That means that the meaning for God's people is that this is how their Saviour, the Lamb that was slain, is pursuing their salvation. This belongs to the all things that God works together for our good. The story of the book of Revelation is about how Jesus keeps his people through these difficulties. And we must always keep in mind where the story of the book of Revelation is heading – the new heavens and the new earth. As Paul and Barnabas put it in Acts 14:22, it is "through many tribulations [that] we must enter the kingdom of God." And the context there is significant. Acts 14:22 says that Paul and Barnabas were "strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

This message is intended to strengthen the souls of the disciples and encourage them. And this is the consistent message of Scripture. Revelation 6:1-8 is intended to strengthen our souls and encourage us to continue in the faith telling us that the way to the new heavens and the new earth is through many tribulations. And the great comfort is that the scroll is in the hand of the Lamb who was slain and he is the one who opens its seals. This is what the good news looks like as it is implemented in history. This is what the coming of the kingdom looks like as it is implemented in history.

This is the outworking of the salvation Jesus accomplished with his death and resurrection. Romans 8:31-32 "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? The book of Revelation including Revelation 6:1-8 shows us what that looks like in history. All things does not mean this-worldly comfort and prosperity. It means that God will keep us in suffering and that nothing will separate us from his love.

The Lamb who opens the seals is the Lamb who was slain – who gave his life for us. Everything that follows from that for believers flows from his love. And indeed as we have seen the disasters in history are warnings and so they are also motivated by mercy. God gives us all a sense of his wrath in these things so that we will understand the seriousness of sin and cling to Christ, but also seek to bring others to Christ. One of the great

themes of the Book of Revelation is that Christians are witness to Jesus and his salvation. In the midst of these calamities we are to interpret them for the world by warning them to flee the wrath to come and by pointing them to the one who gave his life so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

As it turns out, to speak of the pandemic as a judgement of God against sin, is not to condemn people to hell. That is never our calling. The time before the final judgment is a time given for people to repent. It is motivated by grace and mercy. And the disasters that give us a sense of the wrath of God against sin are also motivated by grace and mercy because an important part of the gospel message is that the consequences of sin are very bad indeed. Disasters are given to give weight to that truth. May that truth serve to stir us up to do whatever we can to convey that message to the world in this time of pandemic.