

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	Revelation		Pastor/Teacher
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THE THRESHOLD OF THE END: HOLY TERROR

The sixth seal has to do with physical convulsions. Whenever God becomes angry, whenever God's holiness is demonstrated, God's power over nature is portrayed. The Old Testament constantly pictures the divine visitations of God to His people in terms of a theophany, that is, in terms of majesty and power and glory so great that the physical world is shaken. The most notable illustration of this in the Old Testament is the visitation of God at Mount Sinai. However, this is not all. The Old Testament pictures the physical world in some way as sharing man's fate, as having fallen under the burden of violence, decay, and death. Paul had a similar emphasis in Romans 8:21-22. The earth is, therefore, subject to the divine judgment and in need of the divine salvation. This language of cosmic catastrophe which will occur at the end of the age is the Bible's picturesque way of describing the divine judgment falling on the world. The language is semi-poetic. That means that it is symbolic language which can hardly be taken with stark literalness. However, the language is not merely poetic or symbolic but describes a real cosmic catastrophe whose actual character we cannot conceive. Out of the ruins of judgment will emerge a new redeemed order which John describes as the new heaven and a new earth in chapter 21.¹ Dennis Johnson points out that: "The breaking of this seal precipitates an earthquake of unparalleled magnitude, reaching up into the heavens, blackening the sun, bloodying the moon, shaking the stars loose to fall to earth like figs in the wind, ripping the sky open like rolled papyrus, and then returning to earth to toss mountains and islands from their places. This symbolic portrayal of the dissolution of *the first heaven and the first earth* (Rev. 21:1) as a massive earthquake-skyquake would have been terrifyingly vivid to Asian Christians who had experienced the two major earthquakes that had crippled the cities of Asia Minor in the first century. Several others elsewhere in the empire, including the eruption of Vesuvius that buried Pompeii in 79, had impressed their horrors on the minds and memories of Rome's subjects. The theological significance of the earthquake is rooted in Old Testament precedent. In previous biblical narrative and imagery, the earth was set to quaking at the coming of the Lord in his holiness to establish justice. God's descent to Sinai to deliver his law to Moses for the people was accompanied by earthquake (Exod. 19:18). Frequently the creation shakes before the coming of God as warrior, leading his hosts to battle against his enemies (Judg. 5:4-5; Joel 2:10; Mic. 1:4; Ps. 78:7-8), before the coming of God to reign over the nations (Ps. 97:5; 99:1), before the coming of God to judge the wicked (Isa. 13:13; 24:18-20; 34:4; Jer. 51:29; Ezek. 38:20; Nah. 1:5). These aspects are all found together in the apocalyptic descriptions of the great cosmic quake that will accompany the eschatological theophany. . . ."² "We cannot explain all the fantastic images of natural disaster he saw, John's words correspond to the prophecies of Isaiah and Jesus (Isaiah 30:10; 34:4; Matthew 24:29). The symbolism does not say the earth will be annihilated. John is describing the destructive changes to this sin-spoiled world that will prepare for *a new heaven and a new earth* (21:1). John's attention is turned from the dramatic disturbances in nature to what is going on among the people on earth. From verse 16 we can see that all six of the classes of people he mentions are unbelievers. The way John phrases *every*

slave and every free man (verse 15) shows that he includes *every slave and every free man* in one class of people. The six classes symbolize the total of evil men on earth. Those who despised the Lamb search in vain for protection among the natural formations of the earth. Their futile cry to be protected from the coming wrath was prophesied by Hosea and Jesus (Hosea 10:8; Luke 23:30). The rest of Revelation speaks only of the wrath of God, but here it is the wrath of the Lamb. God is the Lamb they pierced and now must face in the judgment (1:7).”³

A UNIVERSAL TERROR. Boice soberly notes, “This terror will devour everyone. Usually, when some great disaster strikes a country, there are people who have foreseen it and have made plans that enable them to escape. Dictators will have deposited fortunes in Swiss bank accounts. Generals will have planes waiting to whisk them to a safe haven in South America. Even common people will have ways of avoiding a disaster. But this won’t be the case when God comes to execute his judgments. In that day, the rulers of the world’s nations, those who serve under them, the directors of the military forces, the rich, the influential, and also the lower orders of society – the slaves as well as the free but poor men – will all cower before God and seek shelter in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. Unlike previous, smaller judgments throughout history, this judgment will be a universal judgment, and the terror that accompanies it will be universal also.”⁴

CONCLUSION: “Revelation 6 ends with an announcement about the coming of the wrath of the Lamb. To conclude the present study, we must know what such a grave idea – that so many people reject – is all about. The wrath (Greek *orgé*) of God is an important Bible theme. *Wrath* is the response that both humans and God make to (perceived) evil. While human wrath is often misplaced, God’s wrath is one of his eternal attributes, the perfect complement to his love. The wrath of God is his necessary and just response to sin. God’s wrath against sin has always been expressed through his judgments (Ps. 78:56-66). The biblical prophets, moreover, predicted a coming day in which the wrath of God would be fully and finally poured out (Isa. 13:9; Zeph. 1:14-15). This *day of the Lord* was inevitable, but persons and nations that repented would be spared. In the New Testament, the wrath of God against sin has already been revealed (John 3:36; Rom. 1:18), yet those who believe in Christ will be spared the experience of his wrath (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10). The coming day of wrath that the Old Testament prophets predicted is developed fully only in the Book of Revelation. *Orgé* occurs thirty-six times in the New Testament, Romans has the most occurrences (twelve times); then Revelation (six times, 6:16, 17; 11:18; 14:10; 16:19; 19:15). In all six of these, the explicit reference is the wrath of God or of the Lamb. We are faced with a choice concerning the wrath of God. We may choose the convenient belief that the wrath of God is an old-fashioned doctrine that may be safely jettisoned. Or we may take the Bible seriously and accept the wrath of God as biblical truth, on a par with the love of God. God by his holy, loving nature cannot let evil assault his people, nor can he let sinners escape justice.”⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ J. P. Newport, *The Lion and The Lamb* (Broadman, 1986), p. 190. James Boice asks: “Are these descriptions to be understood literally? I tend to think so, but I really do not know. What I do know is that if they are not literal, it is because the reality will be even more terrifying than these symbols are.” *Seven Churches, Four Horsemen, One Lord: Lessons From the Apocalypse* (P&R, 2020), p. 229.

² D. E. Johnson, *Triumph of The Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (P&R, 2001), p. 127.

³ W. D. Mueller, *Revelation: People’s Bible Commentary* (Concordia, 1997), p. 82.

⁴ Boice, op. cit., p. 230.

⁵ K. H. Easley, *Revelation: Holman New Testament Commentary* (Holman, 1998), p. 113.