

The seven seals of the Apocalypse

Part 1

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[00:00:01] I picked up a second-hand book some while back, and it had a picture of this meeting room in it. And there was, I couldn't quite see the speaker, it was a poor picture, but I think it was Mr. Weston, and he was giving an address on prophetic subjects, and that was his forte. So I suppose I should say I'm sitting at his feet as a learner, that was his speciality. But I thought, well, it would be good to hear something prophetic today. I'm not here to stimulate curiosity and prophetic events, but there are certainly things happening in the world which cause alarm. Maybe there are some people who are in the group of those whose hearts are failing them for fear. I hope there's no one in this room like that, but maybe, well, if there is, well, we can learn something from the scripture which will [00:01:05] give encouragement. There are things happening in the political world. There are wars, not just rumors of wars, there are wars. And people are afraid of what will happen next. And not only in the political scene, and in warfare, but also in the natural world, disasters, deep flood in Guyana, great tsunami in the Indian Ocean, thousands affected by disasters, lives impacted upon by terrible unforeseen events, and many multitudes taken away into eternity in a moment of time. Just wonder where it's all headed. Well, as we look at this passage, [00:02:03] I'm going to say some things about the verses. You may not agree entirely with my outlook. You may not agree entirely with my interpretation, but I trust that you will agree wholeheartedly with my conclusion, because I've got a purpose in bringing to you this passage. But we'll go through it just so that we have some idea of what it's about, and then we'll come to the conclusion. Now, most of us are familiar with the book of Revelation, at least up to chapter 4 and 5. But beyond 5, 6, and 7, we get a bit misty. But I'm not going to give a recapitulation of the pieces, you know, and nor an exposition of beyond the chapter we read. You can buy some good books from Nick's bookstall on that subject. But I thought, well, perhaps chapter 6 isn't so well [00:03:04] known. We know something about the seven churches. We know something about what it's like to be in heaven, the great crowd of the redeemed addressing the Lord and speaking to him in fellowship with him saying, thou art worthy. But now chapter 6 brings us to a scene on the earth. And as you read through it, as we read through it together, it's not a very fair picture, is it? Our apocalyptic horses may be reminiscent of what you might have read about in the Old Testament. In fact, there's a point there. Many people, I hope you're not among them, but there are many people who read the Bible a bit like a newspaper. They go straight to the last book. They go straight to the back page. They want to see what the conclusion is. And it's like a schoolboy going to the math book [00:04:01] and looking just for the answers. You've got to look at the beginning first and look at the questions. Then do the working out. And then he can check at the back to see if his sums are right. Well, we're not going to understand much of the book of Revelation if we're not acquainted with Genesis, Exodus and so forth. Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah. We need those, we need some knowledge from the Bible so that we can understand the last book. We might have some

references to the Old Testament as we go through. We see the Lamb opens one of the seals. There was no one else worthy to do this. No one else to do God's strange work of judgment. No one else who really had clean hands who could handle this matter but the Lamb. The Lamb that had been slain. And he comes forth and he opens one of the seals. And the seer, that's John, he hears the noise of thunder. [00:05:07] And one of the living creatures, maybe that's the first one, the lion. It's not specified here. He says, come, come. Go, go, have a look. And John sees a white horse. Who's this white horse? What does this represent? What's this? It's one sitting on him with a bow. No mention of arrows. But a crown is given to him. He has delegated authority. And he goes forth conquering and his objective is to conquer. Well I suppose people in John's time might have thought of something that was quite fresh news at that time. When the Parthians came along and defeated the Romans at a certain battle in AD 62. It was I suppose maybe 25, 30 years after that John writes this. And the Parthian [00:06:07] warriors had were famous bowmen and they had white horses. But John's not wanting to describe recent history. He's wanting to describe something yet to come. There's going to come someone with imperial power and he's going to be very successful in extending the range of his authority and his control. He's going to be an effective imperialist. We think that's all dealt with, no more colonialism. But it's going to come with this man. He's going to promote an empire. And just from the manner in which it's described, it looks as he's as if he's very successful. The crown's given to him. He [00:07:04] doesn't even have to fight for it. He receives his empire. He receives victory. It seems to be a bloodless victory. He's an effective conqueror. He's invincible. He's irresistible. I suppose ultimately he's appointed of God to do this. But he's a man of his own means and perhaps doesn't even count on God at all. And he has his bow. Yes he can be effective at a distance. The bowmen of England who fought in 1066 were very famous for their distance fighting. It was only when they broke rank that they lost. Well he seems to bring peace. I think it's a bloodless victory [00:08:06] that he brings in. And I suppose there'll be a cry in his day. This is the man we've been waiting for. This is the man who can solve the world's problems. This is the man who can bring us peace and safety. But you know there are only a few verses that describe him. Only a few verses that detail his career. No sooner does he go forth to conquer when the second seal is opened. And there's an announcement of a rider on another horse. And this horse is a red horse. The blood red horse of civil war. It breaks out. Of course when the time at the time when John wrote there [00:09:01] have been much bloodshed, much rebellion, much civil unrest in Palestine. There were rebellions. They were put down with ferocious revenge by the Romans. Even in England AD 61 I think Queen Bodicchia or Bodicea as we used to say in the old days. She rebelled against the Romans and they were crushed. She committed suicide and 150,000 men perished. But again John's not writing history.

He's writing a forecast of what's to come. What's to come upon this world.

It's exceedingly solemn. Power was given to him that sat on to take peace from the earth. And the essential element here is really the disintegration of all human relationships. Men [00:10:03] slaying one another. And the whole world a seething cauldron of embittered hatred. Men slaying one another. It's dreadful. And that's to come. When we look at the world today. If you were to read the newspapers. I hope you don't fill your heart and your mind and your eye with those things. But if you read them you say it's a pretty bad world. Well though there's much worse to come. Much worse to come. The world is maturing and ripening for God's judgment. And then the third seal. No brighter prospect. A black horse. And he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. This is the black horse of famine. And it's rather remarkable the details that are given here. You just look at it. You know the three main crops of Palestine. Israel. They were corn. Vineyards. The wine. Oil. [00:11:05] The olive tree. And these three are always nearly always mentioned. When the crops of the land are being described. In Deuteronomy. Right up to the minor prophets Hosea. These three crops. But

there's going to be a scarcity. There's going to be a shortage. They're going to cost a lot of money. You know the Old Testament expression was to eat bread by weight. And that meant really that they were going to suffer the greatest scarcity. There'd be a month to eat bread by weight. Now you might say look here. I won't describe the exact details but a measure of wheat for a penny. That's how much it would cost. Not how much it was costing. Normally a penny a denarius the Roman penny bought [00:12:06] eight to sixteen measures of corn and perhaps three to four times that amount of barley. But John is foretelling a situation when men's whole working wage for a day would be needed to buy enough corn for one person. Just for himself. Not his wife nor his children. Nor leave anything over for anything else that was necessary. It was going to be a time of acute need. And they were desperate times for multitudes that are just around the corner I believe. Just ahead. Desperate times for many people. And yet it's these desperate times would still leave the luxury of the rich untouched. Yes. The essentials were prohibitively expensive and yet the luxuries would not be affected. The [00:13:05] oil and the wine. You might say well that's a bit strange. How is that possible. Well it's not entirely abnormal that there should be wine when there's no corn. Vines grow with their roots much more deeply than corn. And they can stand a drought which would wipe out a corn crop. You'll remember in Genesis 43 that Joseph went down to Egypt in the time of Joseph with best or choice fruits of the land. Fruits there. But he needed grain. There was a famine in the land. But still there was something to give. And that's the sort of thing we have here. Multitudes will suffer not only grinding poverty but being great ones. And that's coming. That's foretold by the prophet. I remember in Sunday school days it was suggested by Mr. Gale also a former speaker on the platform here. He [00:14:07] said well I've often wondered what the oil and wine might not be the luxury goods but they might even be the medical supplies because the Samaritan poured in oil and wine. Well it may be that in the way God deals with people generally yet there is mercy who can tell. Then we come to the next. Pale horse of pestilence and death. And there's a rider and a follower. Maybe two riders.

Age-old executioners. And they go to work. And the picture is a grim one. A creature blanched with terror. Completing the four sore acts of judgment akin to what you get in Ezekiel I think chapter 14. Sword famine evil beasts and pestilence. And here John is using a well-known figure from [00:15:03] the from the Old Testament. Of what will happen when God dispatches his wrath upon disobedient people exceedingly solemn. All these things will soon come to pass. I want to tell you that I believe there's a word of consolation to the Christian reader. You'll not find it in this passage exactly but you'll find it in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 where we're told that we're delivered from the coming wrath. The Lord is coming and he's going to take us out of a scene which is ripening for a judgment. Which is beginning in the details which are here described and spoken of. And the Christian will be taken out of this scene. He'll not be here. He'll be participating in that great crowd that is described in chapter 4 and chapter 5. Praising [00:16:06] the Lord. Addressing the Lord. In company with the Lord. In communion with the Lord. Whispering in his ear you're worthy. What a wonderful prospect. But the world that has disobeyed God and has not chosen to accept the gospel is only ripening for judgment. The terrible things that are happening in the world whether they be natural sea quakes and disaster. Whether they be wars and plagues and diseases are nothing compared to when God pours out his wrath on a world which has rejected his son. God has a controversy with this world. And it is as if God were to say to the world what did you do with my son? What have you done to the Savior? And the world will unitedly respond to God [00:17:01] and say we hated him without a cause. We put him on the cross. Oh how unspeakably solemn that is. And therefore because men have rejected the Savior God's wrath abides on them. But wait there are some here in our ninth verse. I don't think they're Christian but I do believe they're believers. I do believe that they are godly souls. They are earnest sufferers and witnesses for the Messiah. But they have suffered for their testimony and for the Word of God. And they have suffered martyrdom. Christians in Revelation chapter 2 were already exhorted

to be faithful unto death. But once they had been given notice to quit and been taken up into the Father's house. Others would stand up. Godly remnant of Israel. But they would perish for their testimony. And that's what happens. And [00:18:09] these are souls under the altar. Just look at it. It's a rather unusual figure isn't it? The Lord Jesus had predicted this in Matthew 24. He said then they would deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death and you will be hated of all nations for my name's sake. The picture that we have here of these people who are under the altar is really I suppose one of the rituals from the rituals of Old Testament times. The blood is the life which belonged to God. And I think it says in Leviticus 4 it says the rest of the blood of the bull the priest shall pour out at the base of the altar. And I think this is what gives meaning to the passage here. The souls of the martyrs are beneath the altar. That is to say their lifeblood had been poured out as a sacrifice to God. They [00:19:05] had suffered. Just like the Apostle Paul in his own time he said I'm already on the point of being sacrificed to Timothy 4. These had been sacrificed. They'd given their life in testimony to the truth that they held. And they suffered for it. And then they cry. They cry how long how long O Lord reminiscent of one of the Psalms. Psalm 79 fifth verse. How long? Well the Christian he has a different cry. Our cry is Lord Jesus come. We're not saying how long. We say Lord come he's coming soon. But they cry out how long. To them perhaps even in the short period that they had rested from their testimony. Seemed almost as if God was inactive. The world was getting worse and [00:20:05] worse. One disaster after another. But the Saints will never doubt that God's ultimate action of judgment and the final vindication of the righteous will take place. And God will vindicate his honor and vindicate his Christ and all those that are attached to him in testimony. Whether past or present. They cry out how long. But the martyrs here they must rest a while. A while longer until maybe it's the words of the English prayer book. It will please God to accomplish the number of his elect. And to hasten his kingdom. God's time is not ours. But inexorably he works to accomplish [00:21:01] his purpose and eternal counsels. They cry out how long. God will in due time give his answer and satisfy them entirely. They cry out how long. We cry out Lord Jesus come. They're given robes and they're resting. Others are going to be added to their number. And perhaps as you look at verse 12 an answer is coming already. Even in the sixth seal. Perhaps not a complete answer. An initial response to the cry for vengeance. The whole structure of society is shaken. Great earthquake.

We've seen what a great earthquake has done in the South Indian Ocean. Terrible disaster. When I [00:22:11] thought of some of the people that we knew in those places. Real people. Not just a great statistic of 250,000 lives taken and multitudes left homeless. But real people. Men. Some active in their livelihoods. Fishing. Working. Taken in a moment of time. Women at home cooking. Looking out at the children. Gone. Little children swept away at sea. Did not bring a tear to your eye. Did you not weep for the multitudes who went into a Christless eternity. Oh what a terrible unspeakably solemn occurrence that was. Did not make you sad. But here scripture speaks of a great earthquake. Doesn't give detail. Well it may be more moral here than physical. But you could [00:23:10] see what a physical thing has done to the world. Changed people's outlook. It affected them greatly. But oh when there's a great earthquake in society. When established authorities and dynasties. When powers. Every form of authority is darkened. And shaken to the very foundations. You can see the world's not going to get better. It's only going to get worse. There are some who even believe now the world is getting better. And that eventually the Christian gospel will overwhelm the world. But the Lord has taught us that evil men will wax worse and worse. The prospect is only bright [00:24:04] for the Christian. Save for glory. We're looking forward to seeing the Lord Jesus face to face. But for the world. For those who have refused to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. The prospect is exceedingly terrible. And what's it like here? Fear takes hold. People are afraid. And they cry out in terror. They're conscious of their unfitness for God's presence. That's a dreadful thing isn't it? When the earth will tremble.

There'll be a great shaking. Not only physical. I think there will be some physical phenomena. But darkening of the sky. Sun, moon, stars. And all their array will be affected. Not only what you see in the cosmos. But the very order in society. What keeps [00:25:06] things. Makes you safe to go down the street. What makes sure that you get electricity to turn the switch on. You know if your electricity were to go from this world. You couldn't use your computer. You couldn't even phone to call the police. A disaster can come which will affect us so radically. We've become so dependent on what we've made. And if all those things were taken away. All the props and all the supports of society. Whatever it is. Whatever form it takes. Where would man be? He couldn't even make a cup of tea. He wouldn't be able to kindle a fire. He wouldn't be able to look after himself. He'd be in a sorry state. You know I remember when we had [00:26:03] the hurricane in London. We didn't have many hurricanes here. Blessed with wonderful weather in England. But we did have a hurricane one night. And it blew. And it blew. And I had a fence. And it blew in the air. And I remember going in my garden in my pajamas. And got hold of that fence and shoved it back into place and tied it down. And I looked up. There were no lights in the street. No lights in London. There was an eerie darkness. And a strange silence overall. In between the bursts of the wind blowing at incredible speed. And doing its destructive work. Dustbin lids then taking off and going down the street. And I was afraid that night. It was a terrible night. Do you remember the night of the hurricane? It was a wonderful thing. Most terrible indeed. Great [00:27:06] sways of trees cast to the ground. Well the worst is yet to come upon this world. That little hurricane in England is nothing compared to what will happen. Folding up of the heavens like a scroll.

Chains like a garment. Folded up. Hills and mountains moved. Scripture is full of details regarding this. You might think well now. People who enjoyed luxury. People who had money. People who had resources. They could get a plane and fly away. Go to some remote island and escape. Kings of the earth. The great men and the rich men. Chief captains, mighty men. Bondmen and every [00:28:02] free man. No one's exempt from the trouble. Not in that part of the world where these things will happen. But what do they do? What could they do? Has God disappeared? Has God ceased to exist? Has God no more mercy? Has he ceased to be a God of love? No. They could cry out to God and say Lord save me. They could cry out yet and say have mercy on us. But what did they do? They cried to the creature. They cry instead to the mountains and the rocks. And instead of falling on their knees they cried to what God has made and say fall on us. How foolish. And yet they have this sense as I've just said. Of being completely unfit for the presence of God. Hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne. And there's a very strange juxtaposition of words. The wrath of the [00:29:01] lamb. You seen any sheep in the fields? Have you seen any lambs? The little lamb. Has a lamb ever been wrathful to you? I used to be afraid of dogs. I know someone here who's more afraid than I. But not of a lamb. But that's what they see. And that's what they perceive. And furthermore in their ignorance. Because they don't know really what God has to say in his book of Revelation. They might not know the end of Revelation chapter 19. They say the great day of his wrath is come. And they don't realize this is just a foretaste. Just a starter. Oh how solemn. These are introductory judgments. Which will come upon the world which has rejected the Lord Jesus Christ. Very solemn.

We speak about it. And we consider it. And we say well that's very serious. I wonder if it has [00:30:10] any effect on us. I wonder if it changes our lives. Knowing these things. We say well I've got this little prophetic outlook. Just on a chart. And I've got the chart. And I just see where it all fits in. Your chart may be your favorite one. And you may have one which you like. Not quite the same as mine. But you can see where it all slots in. And you think you've grasped the meaning of Scripture. You think you've grasped its import. I want you to just look at chapter 8 verse 1. And we're going to not exactly be silent for half an hour. But we're going to meditate for a moment. There was open the seventh

seal. You've had six already. And they've been [00:31:03] really very bad. A seventh seal is really a precursor to a further outflow of God's judgment and dealings with men. But before there's the manifestation of that. This happens. There was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour. It's very difficult to conceive isn't it. Silence in heaven. Maybe you're familiar with chapter 4 and 5. And great choirs. The mass multitudes of the redeemed praising the Lord singing the new song. Thou art worthy. And they delight to sing it. And aren't you looking forward to being there. It'd be a grand thing to be just there praising the Lord. And we won't worry about the volume. It'll be a happy thing to praise the one who loved us so much. And we'll give full and perfect. And it will eventually in the course of [00:32:05] things be unending expression of the deep feelings of gratitude and worship that are already placed in our hearts. It's gonna be a great moment. We're looking forward to that very very much. Isn't that so? We're looking forward to the Lord coming. We're looking forward to being in his presence. And we're looking forward to giving him his due. But now there's silence. In the place where there is normally melody. There is silence. And not for a moment but for half an hour. You know recently we they had three minutes silence for the tsunami victims. Three minutes. You know some people can't sit still for three minutes. I'm one like that. And some people can't. It's very difficult to remain silent. But there will be silence. It's a kind of breathing space in [00:33:05] the narrative. Or is it a solemn period of reflection on what has just gone before. And what is just about to happen. Before the unfolding of yet more shattering earth shattering judgments which will come upon a world which has rejected the Lord Jesus Christ. What is the reason for this silence? Have you thought about it? Well it may be just that. I wonder whether we ought to be a lot more serious in our conversation. And in our manner when we speak about judgment. Whoa whoa whoa. How unspeakably solemn that is. The judgment of God. The severest judgment of [00:34:01] God has fallen upon the Lord Jesus. He drank the cup which his father gave him to drink. There's not one drop of judgment left for the believer. It's been drank. But oh you know we speak about it perhaps too glibly, too readily, too familiarly, without grasping how awful, how dreadful judgment really is. And it seems as if possibly God has called for half-hour silence. So that those contemplating revelations of God's purpose and counsel might realize that they are in heaven by God's grace. But there is another possibility as to the silence. And maybe when I get down from [00:35:02] the platform someone will come up with another suggestion. And I'll always welcome to hear the other suggestions and take them on board if you can demonstrate it from a scripture which would be even better. But you know I was very impressed to hear that when Stephen was martyred, the first Christian martyr, the Lord was standing. It's almost as if all of heaven, the Lord particularly, were intensely interested in what was happening to one of his suffering sons. He's standing. Of course sometimes we have to try to explain that with a dispensational touch and say well if Israel had repented at Stephen's preaching the Lord would step down and establish [00:36:02] the kingdom. Well that's one explanation. But I'd like to think of it as the Lord standing in honor of his suffering son. And here it seems as if the Lord has called for a half-hour silence in order to consider the prayers of the suffering saints that are rising into the courts of heaven above. Even amidst judgment there are still suffering saints who are standing up for the Messiah. And they're not neglected. And their silence, their cry has gone up to God, how long, and everything in heaven halts so that the prayers of the saints may not only be heard but rightly considered. It's a very precious thing to remember this that when we bow down to pray, that God bows down to him. A wonderful, fatherly, tender consideration of the feelings of his [00:37:12] people. He is not roomy. He is occupied with the cares and burdens of his people in whatever dispensation they are found. Whether the present or the one to come. Well these are just some considerations that I've had before me. But I want to really come to the conclusion. Why do we have to know these things? What's the objective of the Spirit of Christ to tell us these things? To tell what's going to happen? Well again we might deduce several conclusions. But there's one I want to bring to your attention tonight. You see, it's all very well coming to meeting. It's all very well understanding

something of the Bible. But what's most important, I believe, [00:38:07] for us at the present time, is that we might be more godly. That there might be greater piety among the Lord's people. That we might be more separated from the world which is ripened at an alarming speed for judgment. And Peter takes up this line of ministry. And you can turn with me to your Bibles. In 1 Peter chapter 4 verse 7, there's a line there which will do us all well to heed. And if you forget all my explanations of Revelation chapter 6, it would be well to go home with these verses. In 1 Peter chapter 4 verse 7, but the end of all things is at hand.

Be ye therefore sober and watch unto prayer. Have you learned that lesson? As the consideration [00:39:13] of coming judgments upon a Christ-rejecting world, on your fellow men and women, your neighbors, your colleagues, all perish the thought, terrible thought, even those of our own household. We've heard the gospel. Are we to be glib and indifferent? Are we to be careless? Are we to be light and frivolous in our ways? The challenge is, be ye therefore sober. And then Peter in his second epistle, I'm going to extract some verses in his third chapter. Some words in fact. And I'm going to borrow some of his words. And I trust you'll forgive me for applying them to what I've said. [00:40:06] Verse 11, seeing then that all these things shall be. The rest of verse 11, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness. Looking for and hastening, hasting unto the coming of the day of the Lord. Verse 14, wherefore beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace without spot and blameless. Of course, God's punitive judgment is going to fall upon this world. But we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. And not simply in the light of what God is going to do to the world, [00:41:02] but in the light of that day of reward. Let us live lives which honor him. I'm not going to give a list of what you should do. The points of list of all your failures, because you probably give me a list which is twice as long, which covers my life. But we need to have consciences which are tender, and which are governed by scripture. And we need to lead our lives in the light of these things. If we're going to produce a testimony which is effective, there's got to be a depth of reality which is characterized by sobriety and piety, which if we're not careful, will slip through our fingers, never to return. May the Lord help us to be more like him until he comes, for his name's sake.