

## Lesson # 24 The Sixth Seal Judgment

Revelation 6:12-17

Date: October 31, 2010

<sup>12</sup>When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, <sup>13</sup>and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. <sup>14</sup>The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. <sup>15</sup>Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, <sup>16</sup> 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, <sup>17</sup>for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

## I. Natural &amp; Cosmic Disasters Rev. 6:12-14

One fourth of the world's population has been killed by the time the 6<sup>th</sup> Seal is opened by Jesus Christ ( cf. Rev. 6:8 ). Those still alive may feel safe & lucky – but not for long. While much of what has occurred so far could be attributed to the natural flow of human events – peace, war, famine, sword, pestilence, persecution – what follows now is unmistakable in origin. The only thing still stable through the first 5 Seals is good old earth, but now a great earthquake occurs & there is no safe place left on the planet.

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Robert Thomas points out that, before we get too far into this passage, we must answer 2 questions<sup>i</sup>;

1. ) Is this passage meant to be understood symbolically or literally? And
2. ) What is the timing of the fulfillment of this passage? Is it happening immediately after the 5<sup>th</sup> Seal or is it closer to Christ's return?

1. ) Some commentators see this judgment as symbolic. Early apocalyptic literature did not interpret this sort of language literally as a rule. Some use passages like Isa. 2:12-19 ( esp. v. 19 NKJV, "shake the earth" vs ESV, "terrify the earth" ) as a symbol for the overthrow of human pride; and see **Isa. 34:2-4**, which is said to be a descriptive symbol for punishing principalities & powers<sup>ii</sup>.

The problem with this sort of thinking, however, tends to say that OT prophetic passages like these cannot be taken literally. But why would we not take our passage in Revelation literally? Rev. 6:12-14 describes cosmic disturbances right alongside natural disturbances ( 15-17 ). There would be no need for symbolism of earthly events followed by the very earthly events they symbolize!

No, instead it makes more sense to see the judgments as literal, albeit cosmic in scope, and then the result of those judgments described afterwards. Another example of this is found in **Haggai 2:21-22**; and what could be plainer than Jesus' prediction in Matt. 24:7..."there will be famines & earthquakes", as well

as Luke 21:11; “*There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines & pestilences. And there will be terrors & great signs from heaven.*”?

Taking our passage literally respects the OT prophecies, the Olivet Discourse, and it compels us to see how much of the sedate & peaceful creation we enjoy today depends on the benevolent control of our Creator – cf. **Col. 1:17** ).

Through all of this, we also need to remember that this is apocalyptic literature and literal can mean apparent, visually seen and understood without the sky actually vanishing and all the mountains being removed. Otherwise, where would there be found caves, mountains and rocks under which the people seek to hide?

3. ) When does the vision occur? It appears to parallel **Matt. 24:29**, where Jesus places it “after the tribulation of those days”, and it would seem to indicate ( **v. 30** ) that it is just prior to Christ’s return. However, the weakness of this argument is exposed in Rev. 6:16-17 where people can seek hiding places. When Christ’s return is imminent, there will be no place to hide.

This is not the absolute end of the tribulation, because we still have the 7<sup>th</sup> Seal to be opened and all that follows it. Also, there are yet believers to be saved and martyred ( Rev. 6:11 ), and Rev. 16:18 mentions another earthquake ( 7<sup>th</sup> Bowl ) at the end which is said to be greater than any which has preceded it. That is not said about this earthquake in our passage. No, this vision is in sequence of time and foreshadows the destruction yet to come. ②

## A Great Earthquake

In the wake of recent disastrous earthquakes in Haiti ( 230,000 killed ), Chile & Indonesia, and the earthquake related Tsunami that killed over 160,000 people on Dec. 26, 2006, we can never assume that earthquakes are just exciting natural geological phenomena, but we must respect the power behind them and be thankful we live in a relatively stable geological region where there is little likelihood that our city will be devastated by an earthquake.

For much of the world, potentially fatal earthquakes are a fact of life, and they come without warning, decimating buildings, communications & roadways, and killing people. The most frightening thing about earthquakes is that they disrupt the one thing we think of as stable – the ground beneath our feet. The ground instead becomes our enemy and reminds us that even the land is under the curse of the fall ( cf. **Rom. 8:22** ).

The earthquake described in Rev. 6:12 is not *the* earthquake that is described in Rev. 16:18-20, but is still significant, because it is called a great earthquake. There could be a more supernatural aspect to this earthquake too because v. 13 seems to tie a shaking of the very heavens accompanying this too. This means

that the earthquake is at the very least, a worldwide quake which could even be strong enough to affect earth's rotation and its' aspect with regard to the sun.

The sun becomes as black as sack cloth, and the moon turns red.

Sack cloth was a coarse hair garment worn during times of mourning ( cf. Isa. 50:3 ). OT judgment prophecies make much mention of the darkening of the sun – Isa. 13:10; Ezek. 32:7-8; Joel 2:10,31; Amos 8:9. For the sun to get this dark, many things could be being signified: an extended eclipse, the precursor to a nova, or more likely a darkness in appearance from earth as a result of the ash & dust thrown into the air as a result of the great earthquake and what would almost be certain volcanic activity associated with it – venting ash, steam, gas, vapors, dust, etc. into the atmosphere. This could easily darken the sun, and account for the red appearance of the moon.

The red moon is also mentioned in OT prophecy; Joel 2:10, 31. This will add the horrifying erasure of normal things...those common graces of God's creation that men have taken so much for granted over many millennia. The reflected light usually seen on a clear night when the moon is out will be drastically reduced, keeping earth in darkness, darkness to match the mood of those times.

The stars of the sky fall to earth – v. 13

The 4<sup>th</sup> aspect of this disaster is the falling of stars ( Gr “*astere* ) from the sky. ③ The Greek word here is not limited to what we call stars, but can mean any heavenly body except the sun or moon. So, this is likely describing asteroids, meteors and meteorites coming into the atmosphere and striking earth, because of the comparison given to figs falling off of a tree during a gale. Some take a more sensational viewpoint and postulate that these are ICBM's falling to earth and causing thermo-nuclear explosions.

As these impact the earth and seas, they add to the devastation and terror, and will throw millions of tons of dust into the air, along with impacting the quality of life on earth as towns, cities, villages and individual buildings are struck by this new judgment.

The sky vanishes as a scroll.

What could it possibly mean “the sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up”? Does it mean that the atmosphere disappears? **Isaiah 34:4** describes this scene or one like it. There are a couple of possibilities here that could explain what is taking place. The sky vanished NOT because it was removed and the atmosphere was now open to outer space, but more likely because all the smoke, ash and dust generated by the earthquake, meteorites, etc. create a mask which travels into the atmosphere and shrouds any view of the sky – it is as if the sky has disappeared.

Henry Morris has a different perspective<sup>iii</sup>; that perhaps the earthquake and the removal of mountains and islands signifies a massive tectonic plate shift and the rapid movement of these plates causes the sky to appear to be moving away from people on earth, when it is really the people who are moving, not the sky.

Whatever phenomena is being described here, it is going to be such a horrifying terror, that combined with the cacophony of earthquakes, meteorites & volcanic it evokes the reaction of the people on earth as described next in our text.

## II. The Opposite of Repentance      vv. 15-16a

Verse 14b describes the complete upheaval & restructuring of earth's features. Every mountain & island being removed from its' place is difficult to even imagine. If you've ever seen video of Mt. St. Helen's during the eruption as ½ the mountain slides downslope to the valley below, you can imagine the heart stopping terror that will be experienced when that same scene is repeated all over the world at the same time.

“Then” ( v. 15 ) every category of human being is covered here. From the most powerful politicians and military leaders to the lowest dregs of humanity find a common bond as they realize they have a common enemy – God. Their plight is magnified by the fact that they irrationally seek shelter in the very places where the effects of the judgment are being concentrated – the caves & mountains! But what else is there? Most buildings are likely leveled, the earth is full of cracks and fissures, the earth is moving and shaking & no roof is stopping a meteorite – but what are they hiding from? ④

It is their desire ( v. 16 ) that the mountains & rocks would fall on them and cover them from what has now become obvious – that these disasters are not natural, and in fact, are of supernatural origin. Notice their specific request; *“Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who is seated on the throne ( the Father ) and from the wrath of the Lamb...”*. Stricken with complete panic, it is an incredible fact that these people recognize with some measure of theological acumen that it is God and Christ who are behind these earth shattering events.

Notice: It is not to be considered as saving faith that these people recognize the source of the disasters, but it does indicate that the source & nature of what is occurring is being plausibly narrowed down to a divine source rather than to just providential occurrences, even though all these events could be passed off as simple geologic, atmospheric & cosmic happenstance.

The thing that I believe is most astounding in this account is that these people obviously realize that they are experiencing God's judgment, yet they prefer to call on the rocks to fall on them & hide them rather than call out to God for mercy and salvation! This passage is a great proof of human depravity & deadness in sin. Unless God grant repentance, no one will repent, no matter what circumstance they find themselves in<sup>iv</sup>.

Sometimes, great tribulation in people's lives does lead them to seek God and they do get saved as a result. However, great times of trial can also harden peoples' hearts against God and even those who may appear outwardly to be saved use the trial as a reason to renounce that 'faith' and leave the church, and their profession of 'faith' – cf. **Matt. 13:20-21**. Will there be some who will respond and be saved? Certainly – the record is clear that many people will be saved during the Tribulation period.

### III. The Great Day of Their Wrath vv. 16b-17

Those crying out in our text for the mountains, hills and rocks to fall on them and hide them think that this will be a better fate than facing an angry God & His Son. In the OT, this same sort of utterance precedes times of judgment in Israel and take on a prophetic bent with regard to what we see here in Revelation: see **Isa. 2:10,19,21; Hosea 10:8; and Luke 23:30** in the NT. This notion & desire depicts raw, unashamed terror and woe. While people certainly fear death – even believers do to a certain extent – the real, deep down suppressed fear is of the certainty of judgment by this Holy God.

They dread not only God on the throne but “the wrath of the Lamb”. Those who see Jesus only as meek, mild, loving Son and God as the angry God whose wrath must be appeased by His Son, who as a man, understands us better, have never read Revelation. Throughout this book, John records clearly that Jesus Christ is the One doling out the judgment plagues, ( he is after all, the One opening the Scroll ) and that He will be the judge on the Great White Throne. It is Christ who will kill all unbelievers as He returns in Rev. 19: 11-15, making their fallen bodies food for the scavengers ( vv. 17-21 ), and will do the same again as He quells the rebellion at the end of the Millennial Kingdom in Rev. 20. ⑤

It speaks volumes of the grasp on theology that most of these doomed people will have as they recognize that the wrath they are experiencing is coming from Jesus Christ.

Robert Thomas comments here; “*Mankind in his rebellion correctly analyses the cosmic & terrestrial disturbances as a part of the great end-time day of wrath from the One sitting on the throne & from the Lamb* v.” Although the cry from these people occurs now, it probably also carries with it a recognition that the wars, deaths, famines and pestilences were the beginning of wrath. It did not start at the 6<sup>th</sup> seal. The severity of this seal is likely the trigger that finally brings this theology to the forefront of their minds.

This ‘great day’ is not a single day, but means more like a limited & specific period of timing encompassing the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel ( 7 years ); the Tribulation & Great Tribulation; the time of Jacob’s Trouble; all the judgments depicted in Revelation & the OT passages dealing with this time, and finally culminating with the Lord’s return and the end of the Tribulation – the Millennial Kingdom. It is a time when God applies maximum and designed pressure on the world

with the intention of punishing His enemies, saving Israel en masse and bringing history to a screeching halt.

Robert Thomas comments one more time; *“This opening phase of the Day of the Lord should be identified closely with ‘the hour of trial’ (Rev. 3:10) & the period of the Seals in its’ entirety. Seal # 6 is not the end, but God’s wrath is certainly in progress* <sup>vi</sup>.”

“Who can stand?” This question does not mean to stand before God at the judgment bar. It has to do with the capacity of humans to survive what will take place during the Tribulation as it not only begins but as it progressively gets worse and intensifies under God’s unfolding wrath. Notice **Nahum 1:6**. Revelation 7 will show us who can stand.

Next lesson – Lesson # 25 Rev. 7: 1-8...The 144,000 Evangelists

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<sup>i</sup> Robert Thomas; Revelation 1-7; Moody; pp. 450-451

<sup>ii</sup> IBID; pp. 450-451

<sup>iii</sup> Henry Morris; The Revelation Record; Tyndale; 1983; pp. 122-123

<sup>iv</sup> Some passages that tell us that repentance is a gift from God – Acts 11:18; II Tim. 2:25; Rom. 8:7-8.

<sup>v</sup> IBID, Thomas; p. 457

<sup>vi</sup> IBID, Thomas; p. 459