

## "How Long, O Lord?"

There are many questions that we ask of God in life. One question that we often ask in some form or another is the question the murdered Christians ask here in **Revelation 6:10**. It says they cried out with a loud voice, "*O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you judge....*" This question: How long, O Lord, before you act, or judge, or deliver, shows up in a lot of different ways and places in the Bible. It occurs in multiple Psalms and opens the book of the prophet Habakkuk. Sometimes we go through problems and struggles that don't seem to get any better and we question, and complain to God about the situation. We ask, *How Long, O Lord?*

This Monday is Martin Luther King Day. I was reading a blog by a friend, another Acts29 pastor Dr. Eric Mason this week. Dr. Mason is the lead pastor of Epiphany Fellowship in Philadelphia. He also serves as president of *Thriving*, a ministry dedicated to helping ethnic minorities to be trained for ministry in the urban context. I shared his blog post titled: "*Good Grief: The gospel, race and our experiences*" on our Facebook page". Just reading it reminded me of how many of our black brothers and sisters are hurting and asking, "*How long, O Lord?*"

This chapter, **Revelation 6** speaks to this feeling that the world is out of control and that God is moving way too slowly to make things right. But it does so in a way that may be as challenging as it is comforting. What it tells us is that God has his plans and is doing things his way, on his terms and by his time-table. That's the message of this chapter. ***The unfolding of God's plan requires great patience from God's servants. If you are going to serve God you have to trust him.***

As I was studying Revelation 6 all week I kept remembering something Jesus said. In **John 16:33** He said: "*I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*" We are going to do something different in this message. We're going to use half of our time to look at the first couple of verses and then quickly cover the rest of the whole chapter. We will come back in more depth for **verses 9-17** next week. I also want to take the words of Jesus flip the order of them, and use them as the outline for what John is teaching us here in **Revelation 6**.

So here's what this means. The Message of Revelation six is also that.

## **I. GOD'S SERVANTS CAN TAKE HEART BECAUSE JESUS HAS OVERCOME THE WORLD.**

**Verse 1** begins with the words, *Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals.* These words continue John's vision from chapters 4 and 5. Jesus is called the lamb because he is the one who, through his dying for our sins, has redeemed people from every tribe and language and people and nation. He is opening the scroll that represents God's plan for the world. He is going to unfold the plan that will contain all of the events in the book of Revelation. What happens?

**Verses 1-2** ... *I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" 2 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.* Scholars debate the identity of this conquering king who rides a white horse. Some say this is warfare personified or even the antichrist. Having weighed all the options I believe the best interpretation is that this is a dramatic representation of what we've just heard all of creation celebrating in Revelation 5.

### **A. Christ is the ultimate king who conquers.**

To be clear, at this point Revelation is not picturing the literal second coming of Christ but the victorious spread of the presence and message and saving grace of Christ through the gospel.

In his great little book on Revelation, "*Reversed Thunder*" Eugene Peterson takes this view and says: "*The first element in the war which is history is Christ. (Then he quotes this verse and says) Christ is in history ruling and conquering... Throughout the Revelation, which is to say, throughout history, this Christ is leading the hosts of salvation across daily fields of battle 'conquering and to conquer'.*" (pp 75-76)

*There are several reasons this interpretation is compelling.*

**1. That Jesus is the king who conquers fits the theme of conquering in the context.** In every place in the book of Revelation leading up to this, where the word "conquer" is used it refers to Christ or to Christians. In the two places where this word occurs just prior to the white horse it refers to Jesus. The apostle John used the same word in the gospel of John where it also is talking about Jesus. Let's look at four passages.

**John 16:33** *I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome (conquered) the world.”*

**Revelation 3:21** *The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.*

**Revelation 5:5** *And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”*

**Revelation 6:2** *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.*

**2. That Jesus is the one who conquers fits the clearest parallel in the book of Revelation.** The only other place in Revelation where there is a rider on a white horse is **Revelation 19. Verse 11** says, *Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war.* Later, in **verse 16** it says, *On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.*

**3. This also fits what Jesus taught during his life and makes sense of the whole passage.** In Mark 13 and Matthew 24 Jesus talks about how history will unfold. In **Mark 13:8-10** he says *when you hear of wars and rumors of wars do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. 8 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains. 9 “But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. 10 And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.* This is basically the same as Revelation 6. The gospel will be proclaimed to all nations but, there will also be, during that same period of history, wars and famines and persecution and earthquakes etc...

**4. The image of Jesus as conqueror fits the theme of Revelation.** Listen to one verse that captures the message of the whole book. **Revelation 17:14** *They (The enemies of God) will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King*

*of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.”*

There's the message of the whole book for all of you. Of course this does not mean that every soul will be saved and every sin eradicated before the end comes. We're going to see that the end will come with a dramatic and final judgment. But this is showing us that Christ will win great victories *within* human history before the end comes.

## **B. Our lives as Christians are part of the victory of Jesus.**

*So there are two ways to apply this to our lives.*

**1. Take heart.** That's what Jesus said. To fight with Christ will prove to be the right side of history in the end. The first Christians faced determined efforts to root them out and destroy them completely but they established the gospel in the Roman world and when the emperors were long gone the church was just getting started.

Even now where many may fear that authentic Christianity is losing ground in the United States the Christian faith is growing exponentially on other continents. We ask, *How long, O Lord*, but the truth is we just don't know or understand God's plan. Back in 2003 at the beginning of the invasion of Iraq, then Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld was asked by a reporter "about the apparent failure to follow the war plan." Rumsfeld looked at him and said, "I don't believe you have the war plan." Sometimes it seems like we approach God with our frustrations and ask him why aren't you following the plan? Well, as God told Job, and Joseph, Peter and countless others in so many words: *"I don't believe you actually have the plan."* What I'm saying is we know the big picture Jesus and Revelation give us that, but don't know the details. Take heart.

**2. Be faithful.** Faith gets tested when a sense of God's presence fades or when the ordinary appearances of life make us question whether our little acts and choices in life even matter. But they do because God has this big picture in view and we are all fitting into it.

I have known several men who were involved in what was called the Battle of the Bulge in WW2. Now I'm reading a book on it. Interviews were done with some of the soldiers asking about a particular day in the battle and many soldiers remember that day.

One sat in a foxhole all day; once or twice, a German tank drove by, and he shot at it. A few got involved in furious firefights. But mostly, the day passed like any other day for an infantryman on the frontlines.

The book I'm reading talks about one sergeant who just does his job and the author comments. *"On men like this the hinge of battle swung. They did not see themselves in a dramatic role. They would do great tasks, and be abused for not doing them right, and accept this as normal!"* (Beavor, "Ardennes 1944", p. 210). It was only later that they learned they had participated in one of the largest battles of the war, the Battle of the Bulge. It did not feel decisive to any of them at the time, because no one had the big picture of what was happening elsewhere. Part of the spiritual vision that Revelation tries to communicate to us is that that is what our lives are like. Jesus said he would build his church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. Revelation 6 shows him going forth conquering and to conquer. What does that look like in our daily lives? In the book of Ephesians there is a place in Ephesians 4 where it says the church grows and builds itself up in love as each individual part does its work. Your smallish part in the battle is a really big deal! When you come faithfully to help us worship Christ together, to learn, to love, to welcome, and to serve. You are fighting the good fight and taking part in the battle. When you lead a small group that helps us care for and teach people, when you teach children and that helps us connect with kids and their parents, when you pray faithfully and give sacrificially. When you share your witness in the community or serve the cause of justice and mercy, it is all part of something much bigger.

*Now we need to know that and knowing that we also need to know that*  
**II. GOD'S SERVANTS MUST BE PATIENT AND STRONG  
BECAUSE IN THE WORLD WE WILL HAVE TROUBLE.**

Along with the spread of the gospel there will be five things that mark this period of history. This all unfolds in the rest of the Revelation.

**1st. There will be violence and war.** Jesus said there will be wars and rumors of wars. **Verse 3-4:** *When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" 4 And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.*

**2nd. There will be famine. Verses 5-6** *When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. 6 And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of*

*barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!"* A quart of wheat was a day's ration for one man and a denarius was a day's wages. So this pictures someone working all day and only having enough to feed himself - nothing for any other necessities of life or any other dependents. If you bought the cheaper inferior option of barley you could feed a small family maybe. Oil and wine were luxuries so the phrase "do not touch the oil and the wine" suggests that while the poor can barely survive those who can afford luxury items are not affected. There will be wars and poverty and wealth inequality.

**3rd. There will be death. Verses 7-8** *When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" 8 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.* Although the message and influence of Christ and the gospel will spread and conquer there will still be war and famine and poverty and death from many causes that will affect many people. At this point Revelation is not just talking about a final season of intense tribulation but the course of all of history.

**4th. God's servants will be killed because of their faith.** In verses 9-11 the fifth seal is opened. John says, *When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.* My son Alex sent me an article on persecution Saturday afternoon reputable numbers from the World Watch List, audited by the International Institute for Religious Freedom revealed that 2015 was the worst year in modern history for the persecution and killing of Christians around the world.

**5th. This period of history will come to an end when the wrath of God is poured out in a cataclysmic final judgment. Verses 12-17** describe what one scholar calls a massive earthquake-skyquake. The sun is darkened, the moon looks like blood, the stars fall like figs in a wind, the sky rips open like a scroll. People, the great and powerful and rich and everyone else hide and **verse 16**, says they call, *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, 17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"* No one in the Bible talks about the wrath of God more than Jesus. No book in the Bible more vividly and graphically confronts us with the seriousness and sadness of facing God's wrath than the Revelation.

The question that ends Revelation 6 is this: when the full wrath of God comes, who can stand? Do you know the answer to that?

Here it is from **Romans 5:9**, *Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.* **Romans 8:1** *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* This is the gospel. Jesus stood in our place and took the wrath of God we deserve so that we can stand, sheltered and accepted in God's presence through faith in Him. His resurrection is the proof that for those who are in him, because they have trusted in him, there is no condemnation. You will never be transformed so that you are more humble in the way you think of yourself, more forgiving and kind in the way you treat others, and more devoted in the way you relate to God, unless you first believe in his holy and perfect wrath and then understand that, in love, he saved you from the wrath you deserve, and would face, and it's all His grace.

## CONCLUSION

If have received Christ you are part of His victory. He has conquered in your life and saved your soul. Now how reveals the broad strokes of his plan for history and calls you to be patient and trust in him.

There have been numerous articles written about how impatient we are becoming. We pay extra for overnight shipping, get frustrated when a movie doesn't stream in seconds, honk at green lights, expect quick answers to complex problems, speak in half sentences, start things we dont... cut corners and take shortcuts. LOL. It all bleeds over into our character - if we aren't careful we become impatient souls. But here's the thing: When it comes to God and what he wants to do in your life and in this world. You just cannot rush him. You have to trust him. "In the Bible patience is not just a passive waiting for God to work while we go about our own agendas. Patience is continuing to persevere in faith and obedience to God while we trust him to fulfill his plans and promises, on his terms, in his time.

Christian Author Corrie Ten Boom who went through tremendous trials and suffering in World War 2 put it well when she said: *"Don't bother to give God instructions; just report for duty."* How long, O Lord we ask. And he says, As long as it takes for *my* plan to be fulfilled. Your calling- is to live for him. In whatever he calls you to do.

**Amen**