

Conquering through Suffering

The Seals

Revelation 6:1-17

Pain and suffering, generally speaking, are indications that something is wrong. They are part of a God-given warning system that motivates us to determine what is causing the pain and to find a way to fix it. But some pains do not have a solution, at least not in this life.

Generally speaking, alleviating pain and suffering is a good thing, an act of love. Being indifferent to the suffering of another is cruel.

That is why it is so difficult to imagine that God would allow His Church to suffer. If He loves the Church, would He not protect her from pain and suffering? If He has the power to do something about her suffering, why would He not?

In Revelation 4-5, we are given a picture of the Church Victorious. She exists in heavenly glory and gives all praise and worship to God and to the Lamb. And we are told of the worthiness of the Lamb who was slain to be given authority to rule over this present world.

His authority has two great purposes: the redemption of the Church and the conquering of every enemy.

In chapter 6, we return to the Church Militant, the Church living in this world, the world in which you are now living.

And it is a world full of suffering.

Our challenge is to combine our understanding of the Church Victorious with our present experience of life in this world.

The truth that Jesus has received power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing is to encourage you as you experience pain and suffering. And it is to empower you to fulfill your mission in this world.

What is that mission?

It is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ into all the world, having confidence that Jesus will call all His elect to Himself from every corner of the globe.

Matthew 28:18-20 ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

But what will be the environment in which the Church will carry out her Mission to be a witness to a dying world?
It will be accomplished in an environment of suffering.

This context of suffering is described by Jesus in Matthew 24.

Matthew 24:5-14 ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. ⁹ "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

I do not want Jesus' words to be true. I would rather that the Church could carry out her witness in relative ease. Maybe that is why I cringe and recoil every time even the beginnings of tribulation come near to me. My expectation is that living in this world as a Christian and being a witness for Jesus Christ should be easy. I even think that something is wrong when it is not.

Our expectations must change.
Jesus is reigning now.
Jesus is conquering in this world now.
But He is doing it even as we are suffering.

Revelation 6 encourages us to expect suffering in this life.
Christians must carry out their mission of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ while they are enduring many of the same trials as the unbelieving world around them.

The sufferings and trials that seem so random flow to us from the hand of the Lamb.

In chapter 6, Jesus begins to open the seals.
It is best to understand the seals as depicting the entire period from the ascension of Jesus into heaven until His return to judge the world at the end of history.

The trials of history, and the trials of the present, and the trials up to the moment of Christ's return, are controlled by the Lamb who was slain.

Read Revelation 6:1-8. [The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse]

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!"

It is this Lamb who controls the affairs of this world.

The forces of this world are depicted by 4 horsemen.

Together they are the forces driving everything that happens in the world in which we live.

Each horse represents a different force acting upon the lives of believers and unbelievers alike.

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.

While there are good reasons to see this rider as a force of evil and destruction, I think it is best to associate this horse and rider with Jesus Christ as He gives to the Church the authority to take the Gospel into all the earth.

The fact that he sits on a white horse and is given a crown makes us think of Christ. Later on, in chapter 19, it is clearly Jesus who is sitting on a white horse.

Without the heavenly spiritual reality of Christ reigning, the Church would have no power to win people to Christ.

The rider and his white horse symbolically picture what the resurrected Jesus taught plainly in the Great Commission. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus. Therefore, the Church now has authority to proclaim the Gospel in every nation.

Because Jesus has received all authority, the Church can carry out its mission with confidence that her labor will not be in vain.

This fits nicely with chapter 5 in which Jesus is given authority to redeem the Church. Here, He is carrying out the work of redeeming the Church. It is certainly right to think of the work of the Gospel as a work of conquering. Every person that Jesus ever redeems, He plucks out of the hand of Satan. He is conquering Satan as He redeems people.

Psalm 45:1-6 My heart overflows with a pleasing theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe. ² You are the most handsome of the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever. ³ Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, in your splendor and majesty! ⁴ In your majesty ride out victoriously for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness; let your right hand teach you awesome deeds! ⁵ Your arrows are sharp in the heart of the king's enemies; the peoples fall under you. ⁶ Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness;

It is best to see the first horsemen as depicting the powerful force of the Gospel going out into all the world making disciples of all nations.

The three other horsemen describe the forces of history that accompany the Church as she goes into all the world, forces of suffering and death.

Suffering and death are everywhere in this world. Try as you might to avoid them. You will fail. And belonging to Christ's bride does not exempt you from these sufferings.

In the first four seals, there is no distinguishing between the saved and the unsaved. The Gospel is sent to everyone. And the trials fall upon the saved and the unsaved in seemingly random and indiscriminate ways.

3 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 men should slay one another,
 and
 he was given a great sword.

The red horseman describes the presence of wars that continually plague our existence in this life. We have been blessed in America to not have any great war on our soil since the Civil War, but we all are aware of the increasing crime and drugs and violence that fills our land. And Wars are continually springing up throughout the world. And when they do the horrors of war follow. War brings suffering and death, and often in so random and unjust ways.

We are to pray for peace so that the Gospel can go forth, but the fact is that even as armies are slaughtering one another, the Gospel continues to do its work. It is not hindered by the presence of wars.

5 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!"

The black horse describes the suffering of inflation and economic hardship, and famine. These forces can occur apart from war, but when there is war, they are not far behind.

The same God who promises to care for our daily bread also allows us to endure economic hardship, and even famine. The Gospel continues to go forth even as we struggle to maintain a living in this life. And somehow, the power of the Gospel to save is not hindered by this.

7 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.

The fourth horseman is pale (really greenish and sickly) and describes the reality of death and Hades, which is the spiritual abode of those who die.

Hades is the generic way to speak of the soul's existence after death. There is no distinction between the saved and the unsaved. As we look around, the harsh reality of death affects believers and unbelievers alike.

Death surrounds us all the time. But it does not always touch us. You know you have been touched by death when someone you love deeply is ripped from you, and you feel as if a portion of your own soul has been taken in the process.

The Gospel goes forth even as those who proclaim it are taken. I sometimes ponder whether the Lord will take me sooner or later. I hope later. But sooner or later, the Gospel will continue to conquer, with or without me.

Why? Because the Lamb has been slain, and He is worthy to take the scroll and open its seals.

And
They (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.

Verse 8 helps us to see that even though our world is filled with wars and famines and sufferings of all sorts, God limits the effects of death. Only ¼ of the people die. That is not a precise figure. It is a general figure indicating partial. Don't get me wrong, ¼ is huge. But it is not all. God does limit the sufferings of this life. No war, no famine, no pestilence, no natural disaster throughout history has destroyed everyone.

All death occurs under the sovereign hand of our Lord. And He has limited it throughout history.

And for this we should be thankful.

More to the point, God does not prevent His people from experiencing the sufferings of this life. Christians suffer along with unbelievers. We might want God to protect us from war and famine and cancer and disease, but He does not remove His people from these forces.

Even while the Church is carrying forth the Gospel, she is enduring all sorts of suffering.

The fifth seal helps us to see that this entire chapter is about the Church and her witness to the world, and that it occurs in the midst of suffering.

9 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.
10 They cried out with a loud voice,
 "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true,
 how long before
 you will judge
 and
 avenge our blood
 on those who dwell on the earth?"
11 Then they were each given a white robe
 and
 told to rest a little longer,
 until the number
 of their fellow servants
 and

their brothers
should be complete,
who were to be killed
as they themselves had been.

The fifth seal sets forth the reality of persecution.

Some believe that Jesus will rapture His church out of this world before the worst of the Tribulation occurs. I certainly would like this to be the case. But it is not what the Bible teaches. We are taught to expect suffering and persecution.

One primary purpose of the Book of Revelation is to encourage God's people as they are facing suffering and persecution.

Jesus sovereignly allows some of his Church to be killed by those to whom they proclaim the Gospel. These saints who have been martyred for their faith are "under the altar". They are precious to God and held close to Him. These faithful saints are asking God to avenge the wrong committed against them. Their lives were taken unjustly. And they want God to right the injustice.

These saints are given white robes symbolizing purity, but also healing. They are no longer suffering. At the same time, they are told to wait a little longer until the full number of martyrs is complete.

God so orders the persecutions of His people that He has set a precise number of martyrs.

Only when the last one has undergone the injustice of death, will Jesus rise to bring justice to bear.

And this perfect justice will not only be given to those who have endured death but will be given to every Christian who has ever experienced persecution of any kind and remained faithful to Christ.

Church tradition teaches that 11 of the 12 disciples endured martyrdom. This passage surely gives these 11 the assurance of being vindicated on the Day of Judgment. But what about the 12th? Is he excluded?

The 12th is the Apostle John. He was said to have endured being cooked in hot oil. And then, he was exiled to the Island of Patmos. But in the end, he died of "natural causes". Will not God also give John vindication for his suffering. I think so.

And the same is true for you. It does not matter the form of your persecution. God will bring perfect justice at the Final Judgment. But not until the Final Judgement. Even saints in heaven are waiting for this Final Reckoning.

The reason why God does not bring perfect justice immediately is that He is continuing to redeem even those who persecute the Church. The Apostle Paul being the most

obvious. If God had brought immediate justice upon Saul for persecuting the Church, he would not have been redeemed. And how many have been redeemed through Paul's witness?

So, like it or not, as Christians, we must endure injustices against us. We should expect this. Of course, we are not called to like persecution, only to endure it.

But we are to know that even persecution is ordered by the sovereign hand of the Lamb who was slain. And in the end, He will put an end to all persecution and judge our persecutors unless they repent.

While the first 5 seals depict events and trials that occur throughout the time between Jesus' ascension into heaven and his 2nd Coming, the sixth seal points us to that Final Judgment.

12 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,
13 and
 the stars of the sky fell to the earth
 as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.
14 The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up,
 and
 every mountain and island was removed from its place.
15 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,
16 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,
for the great day of their wrath has come,
and who can stand?"

17

The Final Judgment is depicted as the shaking of the created world around us.

Hebrews 12:25-29 ²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷ This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken- that is, things that have been made- in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

In conjunction with the Return of Christ, there is a breakdown of the orderly functioning of the Universe.

The language used to describe the breakdown is poetic. But that does not make it any less real.

There is a Great Earthquake
The Sun is turned black
The full moon turned blood red
The stars in the sky fall to the earth.
The sky vanishes
Every mountain and island is removed from its place

Much of this same terminology is used in the OT to describe God's wrath upon unbelieving nations.

And this same terminology is used to describe the destruction that God poured out upon His own people during the Exile.

And this same terminology is used to describe the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

All these judgments foreshadow the Final Judgment. They point to the time of the end when the entire earth will be shaken. When the Church's mission is finished, the world as we know it will come unraveled.

I am not against efforts to take better care of the environment, as long as they do not give greater value to the earth than to human lives. But I find it ironic that those who

give such attention to the environment often give little, if any, thought to the warnings of Scripture that this creation will one day be dismantled by God.

No attempt by humans to preserve the earth will stop this from happening.

We should not be careless with God's creation. It is our mandate to care for it. But we should also prepare for the Day when this entire creation will be shaken.

The Final Judgment is more than physical catastrophes. It is the Day when all men will stand before the Lamb.

All levels of humanity are brought before the Judge; no one is excluded.

The kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and free man will try to hide in caves among the rocks of the mountains.

But every attempt to escape this judgment will end in failure.

People will call to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!"

Make no mistake, the same Lamb who was slain purchasing a people for Himself, is now pouring out His wrath upon all who reject the Gospel.

Remember this as you tell others of their need for Christ. You are not trying to scare them into believing. But it should give you confidence and courage to be bold in your witness. The person with whom you share the Gospel is going to stand before the wrath of the Lamb if they do not repent and believe.

If you are not in Christ through faith alone, you will not be able to stand before Him on the Day of His wrath.

For those who repent of their sins and cling to Jesus Christ, this Day will not be one of fear.

The wrath that would surely fall upon us, has already been poured out upon Jesus. A portion of the Final Judgment has already occurred when Jesus hung on the cross. Your sins, all of them, have already been judged at the cross. And God will not judge those same sins again.

So, while those who reject Christ should fear the Day of the wrath of the Lamb, we who believe in Christ look forward to that Day, knowing that it will bring the fullness of our redemption, along with the rest of God's people.

Summary points:

1. Throughout the entire time between Jesus' ascension and His return, the Church is called to be a witness for Jesus Christ, to "make disciples of all nations".

2. Our labor in this task will not be in vain because Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and on earth.
3. The Church carries out this task in the midst of a harsh world full of suffering. Christians are not exempt from the general tribulations of life.
4. All suffering is controlled by the Lamb who was slain. The world is NOT plummeting out of control.
5. These present sufferings are the foreshadow of God's eternal wrath which is being poured out on the unbelieving world.
 - a. Even though this suffering is NOT a foreshadow of God's wrath upon believers, it often feels that way.
 - b. Romans 8:1 leads us to Romans 8:28
6. In addition to life's general trials, Christians also will be called to endure all forms of persecution, even at times, martyrdom for the sake of the Gospel.

Hebrews 11:36-40 ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated- ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy- wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. ³⁹ And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

7. Although, God promises to avenge the unjust treatment of His beloved bride, she must wait until the Final Judgment before this occurs.
8. The Final Judgment is coming.
 - a. The order of this creation will unravel.
 - b. There is no escaping the day of this judgment.
 - i. The wealthy and powerful often avoid the worst of natural disasters in this life. But there is no escaping the Final Judgment.
 - c. The wrath of the Lamb will be terrible for those who do not know Him.

Jesus is encouraging His Church that even though they will have to endure all sorts of suffering in this life, He is in sovereign control of that suffering and continues to order all things for the Redemption of His Church.

God as your loving Father will give you many good times in this life. When you experience the good things of this world, you should receive them with thanks.

But along with these good times, you should also expect God to take you through seasons of suffering, and sometimes even great suffering.

Suffering is not something that we desire. And when we suffer it is right to plead with God to end the suffering. But suffering is a reality of this life. And even God's precious Bride must endure suffering.

Persecution is only one form of suffering. But persecution has particular value because when we are persecuted, we are being treated in the same way as our beloved Savior was treated when He walked on this earth.

Suffering and persecution are not a hindrance to the reign of Christ in and through the Church.

Jesus is reigning and conquering even while we are suffering.

The suffering Church is the vehicle through which God continues to redeem His elect. As strange as it sounds, Jesus is conquering through suffering. He conquered through His own suffering on the cross. And He continues to conquer through the suffering of His precious Bride.