

WHEN YOUR LIFE IS OPENED, WHAT COMES OUT?

Revelation 6:1–17

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Revelation 6 says, “I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, ‘Come!’ Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, ‘A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!’

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little

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longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called 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! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’” (Revelation 6:1–17, NIV).

I. Too often we have approached the Book of Revelation from the standpoint of what does this book say about the end time.

While we don’t want to neglect that aspect of Revelation, I think there is a more fundamental question to ask. That is, “What is this book saying to me right now?” Today as we have read the Scripture we have seen Christ taking the unopened scroll of human destiny that is in the hand of God. But, if we see Christ opening human history, we must also see Him as the one who opens personal history, the personal history that belongs to me and you. Whatever happens to mankind in general also happens to us as individuals specifically.

Since we are not familiar with the use of seals on documents as the ancient world was, perhaps we would understand the six seals a little bit better if we saw them in terms of buckles or snaps. If we would, for a moment, picture ourselves having a great big overcoat on, a big leather coat covering an inside body. You unsnap or unbuckle the coat to see what is inside. As Jesus opens

the snaps or the buckles of human history or as He opens the snaps or buckles of our own individual life we might well ask from this series of the six seals what comes forth. What comes out of life when Jesus opens it?

Although there are six seals in this passage of Scripture there are really only three divisions of thought. The first four seals form one division of thought and represent the forces of destruction that come out of life. The fifth seal, the souls of the martyrs, represents the faithfulness to the Lord that comes out of life. And the sixth seal represents fear toward the lamb. As we go through these today we'll consider each of these in turn.

II. Forces of destruction coming out of human life and out of human history are represented by what is commonly called the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

The first horse that comes forth is a white horse, and as you know in the Book of Revelation, there are a good many views of what different things mean. I want to be fair to those views and yet I want to keep driving at the devotional implications, and I always want to be fair to state what I feel is the biblical view, which is my view!

Some have said the white horse represents Christ. He is seen as riding on white. This must represent His coming for the church—before anything happens Christ comes. And also Christ comes riding on a white horse in triumph in Revelation chapter 19. There are some difficulties with that point of view, however, because in Revelation 19 when Christ comes He has a sword, which is His word. Here, he is represented as having a bow, a rather weak instrument in the hands of the Lord. Also his crown is called a *stefanos* in the Greek, a temporal laurel wreath. It's not the crown of royalty. It's the crown of achievement. In Revelation it's the diadem that is a kind of a crown like Queen Elizabeth would wear. Also, it seems very strange that Christ would be summoned forth by one of the four living beasts, or the four living ones. It would seem

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inappropriate as a role for an angel. It also would be out of context with the next three horses.

There seems to be a thing that the rider of the first horse does that unlocks the other three horses and the plagues they bring.

There are some who have said, “No, this doesn’t represent Christ. It represents the church. Christ is promising that before things really bad come on in the world that His church will go forth triumphant.” He says in the Olivet discourse, “The gospel shall be preached in all the nations and then the end will come” (Matthew 25:14). So there’s a word of confidence here to believers that in spite of what’s happening the cause of Jesus Christ will be triumphant on earth.

Again there are problems as you look at the individual symbols. It seems to be out of keeping with the character of the four horses being united in a common task.

It’s probably best to take this white horse as conquering kind of figure. We know in the first century that the white horse was a horse that was ridden in a day of triumph when a returning general would return home from a successful engagement. The bow was a mark of a soldier, and forces far to the east that threatened the security of Rome.

It represents militarism and armed strength to subdue and to conquer. What appears to be here before our eyes is a force of militarism, that is present in the world from the time of Christ until now. This sort of “Me-first, I must conquer” kind of syndrome. When the conquering spirit is let loose in the world it inevitably unleashes war and famine and pestilence. It looks so impressive as we apply this to human destiny for a rider on a white horse to come by looking like he was going to conquer. But we know when militarism goes on the march, what follows in its train. We see in World War II movies the great rallies of Hitler and the thousands of people gathered to see the goose-stepping soldiers. But it isn’t long as we watch the newsreel until we see bombed-out

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cities and orphaned children. We know that the force of militarism at first looks so mighty and strong but when its power is unleashed it inevitably brings tremendous destruction.

Jesus simply indicates as He opens the seal of human destiny that militarism and the quest to conquer and rule and subdue is going to be a force in history.

What is present as a force in history is also present as a force in one's personal life. Whenever Christ opens the seal of our life, the buckles of our life, and inside our life there is found the presence of the Lamb there is revealed that grasping which seeks to rule. Christ when He comes on earth rides upon donkey, not on a white stallion in triumph. He has come as one who serves. That is quite a contrast to one who has come to rule and subdue and to keep people under his thumb. The spirit of Christ says, "We must serve you. We're not interesting in ruling."

The next horse that is let loose is the bright red horse. It is war that inevitably follows this militarism, this quest for conquest. We see in our own United States history that when they decided centuries ago to go to Africa and take slaves that behind that came the force of war that divided and tore our nation asunder. When we look at the bright red horse as applied to history, it's not difficult to look around and see how accurate this apocalyptic vision is in terms of predicting that the human race would be rent by war.

Frank Barnaby, a physicist, states, from 1940–41 there were twenty-four wars. From 1945 to 1975 there were one hundred-nineteen wars on earth, civil and international. But the total duration of these wars in the thirty-year period of time, if you stretched the wars end to end, they would have amounted to three hundred and fifty years. The territory of sixty-nine countries and the armed forces of eighty-one states were involved from 1945 to 1975. Several tens of millions more people were killed than in World War II. Since September of 1945, Dr. Barnaby says there

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has not been a single day in which one or several wars are not being fought somewhere in the world.

When we apply that to human history we see in the average day twelve wars. But when you apply that to your own life on an average day how many wars do you have? When the spirit of me first is released what kind of strife does it bring in its wake or in its train.

I recently have noticed myself getting upset more commonly than I'm known to get upset. I don't show anger a great deal visibly but sometimes I inwardly have an expression of anger. I said, "Where is this coming from? I don't feel it's coming from the Lord." I began to probe a little around in my life to see what I was angry at and I realized that I was angry at some public policy in our community. It seems very innocent to get angry at the government, even a local expression of government or school board or something like this. But it is so easy to become angry and all of a sudden, before you realize what is happening, anger is tripping forth other forces in our life. Instead of being the reconciling people of the Lord in the world, we become push and shove like everyone else.

When the spirit of conquering is let loose, inevitably anger and strife start following it.

Next comes strutting across the stage the black horse. These horses are seen as rapidly following one another. This horse, of course, represents famine. The scales in the hand represent a shortage of food. Whenever food has to be weighed out you know there is a great shortage. Of course famine is the normal consequence of war.

If conquering lets loose war, war lets loose famine

At the writing of Revelation, a denarius was one day's wage and that was equivalent to twenty cents. About twenty-four dollars day would be about the best way to translate denarius right now. A quart of wheat for twenty-four bucks. A loaf of bread for twenty-four bucks. And three

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quarts of barley for twenty-four bucks. Barley is inferior to wheat and would be eaten more by the poor. What this is saying is that a great famine is let loose. There's enough to get by, but a person has to work full time just to feed themselves the good wheat, and they have to work full time to support other people besides themselves, and there's no money left to pay rent or have any of the luxuries of life.

Oil and wine are in this picture of famine. They're not to be impacted and some have taken this and said this simply means that in a time of famine the rich have plenty to eat and the poor don't have anything. But I don't know if the rich could get by on oil and wine. I certainly wouldn't like to eat just oil and wine. It seems the illustration that is being striven for is that grain has very short roots in the ground and would be scorched. And therefore would not produce. But the vine and the olive tree, which have deeper roots, in time of adversity have longer staying power and keep producing. Oil, wine, and grain were all considered essentials of life in biblical days. And don't let anybody tell you this oil represents the oil that they're pulling out of the wells these days and shipping to America. There are some who read Revelation from a standpoint of, "What is the latest headline?" When they see the word "oil" they see "petroleum" rather than olive oil that is being represented here. It's very easy to misunderstand this book.

What is being said in this is simply there is a time of great hunger but it is not a time of starvation. There is still enough to get by.

This is the picture of the world for generations. And even now the food and agricultural organization of the United Nations estimates that four-hundred-fifty million people in the world today are getting too few calories to keep them alive and well. Eight hundred million people on earth live on thirty cents day or less.

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How does this apply to personal life? We see it as an accurate description of what is going to happen in human history—what is happening now.

I think that when we look at these horses, the conquering, the me-first attitude is let loose. Then following it comes an angry spirit. Then, inevitably, it becomes famine, famine in the sense of spiritual or emotional needs. If I am seeking my own interests and if I'm angry and strife-ridden, I cannot reach out and touch the people that are around me who have spiritual and emotional needs which God has sent to me. I'm too drawn up into myself. My spiritual condition will therefore create famine in those around me who are looking for emotional and spiritual support. I think, therefore, there is a real spiritual message to us in the present moment. How many children are starved for love because of parents who are pursuing their own interests? How many spouses are spouses who are starved for love and for emotional support because we are too involved in pursuing our own efforts and our own way rather than feeding with our love those who are about us? We do not feed others if we are selfish.

The Christian life, however, is a real contrast. Whether it's literal famine or spiritual famine we reach out and share. If we only have a little and there's someone around us who has nothing we divide the little we have and we share it.

There comes a fourth horse, the pale horse. The idea of the color here is pallid, the color that would be on a corpse. Following the other three horses there's whole network of destruction that is let loose in the form of Death and Hades which is represented here and of the grave that goes along and collects the dead. The first three horses have opened the door for this force—pestilence, wild beasts of the earth and the sword. Perhaps the word “pestilence” would best describe what is being let loose here.

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The Lord puts a limit on this, even as He put a limit on the famine. Figure that one fourth is symbolic of the fact that not even a majority of the earth affected by this. But we have in our day these pestilences let loose. We would see that the further we move away from God the more we give in to destructive forces. The more beastly and ghastly becomes our personality. So that when we first begin moving away from God in a spirit of conquest and “me too and I’ll have it my own way” we may look morally and ethically beautiful. But by the time we have completed that move we are the color and the pallor of death.

We are aroused in this first horse to an impression of horror. Someone has said that as we see a horse the livid color of a corpse ridden by death with a grave running along greedily gathering up fallen bodies.

Jesus, in opening these four seals, really has given to us a picture of the continuation of human history and personal history without Him.

If we summarize these four horsemen we might ask questions like these: “As the early Christians are reading this what are they thinking? What difference does Jesus Christ make on the cross?” Now He is enthroned in heaven. He’s taken the scroll of human destiny from the hand of God. Will this make a difference in human affairs? Will wars cease? Will pestilence end? And the answer is, the government of Jesus Christ is a spiritual government. To wait for its spiritual aspects one will have to wait till Christ returns at the end of the age. But a startling message to Christians is that from the standpoint of human history, human history is not much altered by the death of Christ and His resurrection. People go on killing. People go on starving. People go on having pestilence. It almost appears from the saints’ point of view that human history has not been changed by the cross. This is, if you will, the paradox of the cross and what Paul preaches as the folly of the cross. It’s foolishness to those who are perishing, but, to those of us who are

being saved, it is the power of God unto salvation. Not the power of God to change the fact that there are wars, but the power of God to change our lives individually.

Certainly also we see that these forces if we look at the tribulation period which hasn't been noted thus far in Revelation by the word "tribulation." These forces are certainly accelerated at the beginning of the tribulation period so we could call them descriptive of the tribulation. But I think the point that we have been trying to arrive at, too, is that these forces represent an inward spiritual condition than moves people away from God.

One other thing they mean to Christians is that as believers see these things taking place they recognize that these events have, first of all, come by the throne of the lamb and He has opened the seals. They give way to the statement that whatever happens in life must first come by the throne of God. There are some things in life that are very difficult to accept as though we were questioning in our mind, "Lord, did You really know this was happening?" Yet this picture in Revelation gives us the certainty that nothing happens without God knowing and allowing it. We can, therefore, with confidence claim the Scripture in this kind of a context that the early Christians learned to cherish. We know that "God is working good in all things to those who love him and who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). What is happening to the world and to me is not accidental. But it's in the control of the Lamb who has my destiny and the destiny of the whole of human race in His hands.

III. We come to the fifth seal, which is an expression of another force which comes out of our life.

Are there forces of destruction that come for us or in its fifth seal do we have a tremendous change? The fifth which comes forth is faithfulness to Christ: the martyrs slain at the altar, their blood under the altar. In the Old Testament the furnishings of the tabernacle in the wilderness

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and the furnishings of the temple were seen as a copy of the true worship in heaven. The altar was a place where blood was shed. Leviticus 4:7, speaking of the Old Testament offerings at the altar of burnt offerings, said the priest shall pour all the blood of the bullock at the bottom of the altar of burnt offering. The blood, the life, is offered at the base of the altar to God. The New Testament picks up this terminology and in the words of the apostle Paul as he approaches his own martyrdom in 2 Timothy 4:6 says, “I am already at the point of being offered up. The time of my departure is at hand.” He sees himself in Old Testament typology of himself going to the altar to be slain with his blood running at the bottom of the altar for the sake of Christ. It’s the prayer of the martyr. I’m about ready to be offered up.

So, as we see this scene in Revelation 6, we see the blood the saints at the bottom of an altar in heaven. The imagery is given.

Again, there is a matter of interpretation. Depending upon one’s prophetic views, some would say these are Old Testament saints who were crying out. Their prayer was not like a New Testament saint, “Father, forgive them.” They are crying out for vengeance. The New Testament saints wouldn’t pray this, so, therefore, it must be Old Testament saints.

The problem with this point of view is the Lord tells them their number is not yet complete and at the writing of this the Old Testament was complete. It creates innumerable problems to say these were Old Testament saints.

There are some who say this is exclusively the Tribulation saints—the saints in the period before the Tribulation have all been taken away. These are now Tribulation saints. I’m sure they would include Tribulation saints, but on the other hand, we learn that the Book of Revelation was written to encourage a first-century church facing martyrdom. One of their own had been killed according to Revelation 2. The apostles had been martyred. Steven had been killed. How is the

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church to handle this situation? It's not sufficient to look years down the road and see some Tribulation period. It's what is happening now with the martyrs.

Besides, Revelation was not a book given to the first-century church with the orders of Daniel that it was to be sealed up until the end, which would have meant only a future generation could really understand it. It was a book to be opened and read by the first generation. Therefore, it had relevance for them, so we approach it from that standpoint.

But this blood of the martyrs represents the saints from all time. An amazing paradox therefore takes place. The Lamb has been given power in heaven but on earth His people are slain. Steven, while he is dying, being pelted with stones and defenseless, looks into the heavens and sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. The believer lives in a certain knowledge that Jesus has not yet demonstrated His power in terms of physical force on this earth. He's content to die knowing that he has died for the truth.

There is a tremendous difference between Steven ("Father, forgive them") and the prayer of Christ ("Father, forgive them") and the prayer here of the martyrs. I think the difference is simply that on earth the person who is dying for his faith is praying for those who are persecuting him that they might be saved. He does not know the outcome of their salvation. If Steven could pray, "Father forgive them," Saul could be saved and become a Paul, an apostle. But when we arrive at heaven the saints are able to look out and see that there are going to be those who will never repent and their blood literally cries out from the ground like Abel for God to vindicate justice on earth.

The martyrs have an absolute confidence in God. They call Him "Sovereign Lord." In the Greek it is *despot*, a word which we also use in English. When we think of a despot we think of someone who is really an Idi Amin. Somebody who has absolute power and does what he will.

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But when the words apply to God it doesn't mean any moral evil but it means absolute control. Here are the martyrs crying out to the Lord who is the One who has absolute control. This is given as an assurance also to ones who may be facing death. We can approach the most difficult time in life with a certainty that Jesus is in control.

The Lord calls to the martyrs for patience. "Wait until then number of your fellow servants is complete." It's always the prayer of the saints that Christ might come quickly, that He might save us from our situation. But the Lord must remind us from time to time that His purposes might not yet be done on earth.

My father had always preached the second coming of the Lord and the imminence of the second coming of the Lord. He was preaching that before I was born. In 1940 before I was born he was preaching the possibility that the Lord might come that year. He might have. But I'm glad that the Lord didn't come in 1940. Personally thrilled about that. Had the Lord come in 1940 I could not have been in the number about His throne. The fact that He waited and didn't come until now means that somehow His number was incomplete. By His waiting I somehow got to be in the throng. While I hold on the one hand from the Scripture this prospect that the Lord may come at any moment, on the other hand, I recognize that His purposes may not yet be complete and there may be others that He would gather in.

The martyrs cry out. What a contrast to the first four forces that are seen as so powerful.

IV. The third force which is let loose—there's the forces of conquest and the faithfulness to the Lord, the third force that is let loose is fear toward the lamb.

Revelation Chapter 6:12–17 shows kind of an end-time cataclysm. Six great events: the great earthquake, the sun becomes dark, the moon becomes like blood, there is the falling of the stars,

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the folding up of the heaven, and the moving of mountains and islands. Again there's the matter that sometimes we look at Scripture and people have different perspectives.

Some approach Revelation like the three series of judgments—the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls—are all sequential. They're chronological. They're laid end to end. If they approach Revelation with that particular point of view they have a great problem with the sixth seal for the sixth seal seems to be the end of the world. The Lamb has come. The wrath of the Lamb is being outpoured. The skies are falling. So what do you do with the end if in your theological system the end is not supposed to come yet? And you've got it all laid out chronologically. Right at that moment then you begin to spiritualize and do away with the literalness of it. So you say things like the heavens here represent governmental and ecclesiastical authority. When they begin to falter then people begin to really get scared and cry out and they think the wrath of the Lamb has come but actually it hasn't come yet. Hal Lindsey has a more interesting interpretation. This is simply nuclear warfare which begins the Tribulation period and this is how it appears but the wrath of the Lamb has not yet come.

I'd say that view is possible but not likely. A more likely point of view, as you read Revelation, is the series of judgments as they unfold are like a printing process, if you've ever done any four-color printing. When I have seen it done, they take a photograph of like all the yellow on a thing. Then all the blue and all the red—whatever colors they use. Gradually they produce a different film for each color. Then they overlay those so as to make a composite. It appears that the series in Revelation, each of them come right to the end. The seals come to the end, the trumpets come to the end, the bowls come to the end. You take them and you overlay them on top of one another and they appear to be covering the same period of time. In the seals you come right to the end. There's a tremendous similarity of language here that Jesus talks about in the end in

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Mark 13. That's why with confidence I can say this appears to be the end. Jesus himself said this would happen.

As we see it happening we're confronted with the ultimate power—the power of God. What is the greatest fear of man? Some feel their greatest fear is death. But the Book of Revelation, piercing to the heart of humanity, says the most basic fear in a human being is not the fear of death at all. The greatest fear is meeting God unprepared.

Death would be preferred. The mountains and the rocks fall on us and hide us from the wrath of the Lamb. The ultimate falling would be to experience the wrath of God, when the Scriptures so clearly point out that Christ came to save us from the wrath of God and gave His blood in order that we might be saved from judgment and that we might escape the day of wrath.

In our day, there is either a denial of God or there is the recreation of God in man's image. So that this aspect of God working in judgment appears so opposite to what is the popular view of mankind today—in the end everybody will come out all right after all. But that sort of view absolutely makes meaningless the seriousness with which the Lord took sin in coming to the cross and dying for us. If, in the end, everything works out all right, why the cross? It is because of the wrath of God that the Lamb of God comes and gives His life for us. "Knowing," as Paul says, "the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Corinthians 5:11).

This incredible picture of contrast is put before us in Revelation, that it is far better to be a martyr whose blood is under the altar than it is to be without God and to be under the rocks. Better to be under the altar than under the rocks. As the Lord opens your life and mine what comes forth? Forces of destruction? Faithfulness to the Lamb? Or fear toward the Lamb? Personal questions as well as questions that relate to history.

Closing Prayer

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There are moments, Lord, when You specially call us to be sober. Moments when we're not necessarily called upon to speak of how to be a better person or the like. But moments when we're called to consider destiny and perspective and Your eternal message, Your character, Your nature. The fact that You have a passionate nature against all that's evil and wrong and will permit none of it in Your presence. Yet you have had this infinite love for us that wants to draw us unto Yourself and You have made a way whereby Your love and Your justice could be upheld, that Christ should experience Your wrath for the sake of our sins. That we who believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. We receive that life from You as indeed it is a gift, not something we have earned or deserved. But standing simply in awe of the greatness of the gift that spares us from the day of wrath. Lord, as this sober message is proclaimed in this hour may all who are here have a personal response to You that says "Lord, I hear Your call, saying 'Follow Me.'" That it is better to be slain for You under the altar than to be hiding from You under the rocks. Lord, let there be a response in our hearts to You, to know that we are in You and to have the confidence that when we have given our lives to You we are kept from the wrath of the Lamb. And that the terrible terrors which could be present in our lives, the forces of destruction were we not to know You, that these have been vanquished by Your power and we're called to live as You in the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.