

## REV 6:1-17—GOD AND EVIL

**INTRO:** Since we are beginning the new year and I am preaching both today and next week, I thought it would be good to begin the year by looking at two very important passages of Scripture that speak to the condition of the world as we see it and what it means for us.

And we need to do this, perhaps now more than ever. Just a month ago 14 people were murdered by Islamic terrorists in San Bernardino. In Paris, 120 people were murdered in one day, and throughout the world there are 1000s upon 1000s of such murders every single year.

That's where today's passage, Rev 6, can help us. This chapter gives is a broader and deeper "behind the scenes" look at the evil forces that are active in our world today. **[READ REV 6:1-17]**

**PROP:** Christ uses even evil for our good.

**O/S:** In this passage we will see this as we consider: (1) Christ is ultimately in control, even of the evil; (2) We will see what this says about God and his relationship with evil; and (3) Where does this leave us.

### **I. CHRIST IS ULTIMATELY IN CONTROL**

Rev 5:1 talks about "**a book written inside and on the back sealed with seven seals.**" v.3 then says that no one in heaven or earth was worthy to open the book except Christ who "**has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals.**" What is the book? That book is God's redemptive plan for the world which brings about the intended purpose of creation, ultimately culminating in the New Jerusalem. As part of his redemptive plan, the book reveals that God asserts his sovereignty even over sin and evil.

Ch.5 said it was Christ's "overcoming" that qualified him to open the book. His overcoming occurred through his death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection and ascension. In doing that, Christ overcame sin, the devil, and death itself. As a result, Jesus Christ alive today, and not just alive but is reigning over all "**rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named**" (Eph 1).

Since that is true, it means that Christ is ultimately in control of the universe. And since *that* is true, it means that Christ ultimately is in control even of the evil forces we see in the world today. Many people try to divorce God from *any* involvement with anything that smacks of evil. The Bible does not do that. If God is truly sovereign over everything—and he is—then he is sovereign over pain as well as pleasure, sorrow and happiness, death and life. If he were not, then there would be huge areas of existence outside of God's ultimate control, and that is unthinkable if he truly is the Lord Almighty.

Today's text makes that clear. Our text talks horses and riders, but that is symbolic language for forces of war, famine, and death. In **6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12**, who breaks the seals that unleash those forces? [Christ]

Notice in 6:2, 4, 8 it says that the horsemen were "given" or "granted" or "permitted" to do certain things. IOW, the forces described here do not have authority on their own to do whatever they want. They are given or permitted authority by God, and **vv. 6** and **8** indicate that there are limits on what they can do. The situation is similar to the book of Job where God permitted Satan to attack Job, but there were limits on how far he could go.

Or we can look at what is going on in Rev 6 as similar to **Rom 1**. Every human being has a propensity to turn away from God and live for himself or herself, and has a natural propensity toward sin and evil. In **Rom 1** 3X God says "**You want this? Then I turn you over. You can do what you want.**" In Romans, God's "turning people over" to act on their own lusts is actually a form of his judgment on them.

Similarly, Rev 6 symbolically depicts God unshackling people to do what they want as a form of his judgment. The four horsemen are based on the four chariots of **Zech 6**. The four chariots of Zechariah brought judgment on the nations. So here, as one commentator said, "**Each [of the 4 horsemen] is a cause, a manifestation of certain truths connected with the kingdom of Christ [concerning] the judgment of the world. Even war, famine, and death and Hades . . . are simply used, as scourges of mankind, to give general expression to the judgments of God.**" IOW, God uses the evil we do to express his judgment on the evil we are.

When do these events happen? The events symbolized in the seals of **Rev 6** actually characterize the entire period between Christ's first coming and his second coming. Biblically, there are at least two reasons why we know this:

- First, as we mentioned earlier, ch.5 links the breaking of the seals with what Christ accomplished on the cross. Therefore, **Rev 6** is describing destructive forces that were inaugurated almost 2000 years ago.
- Second, this is confirmed by the fact that the seals of Rev 6 parallel the signs that Jesus said would characterize the entire period between his first and second advents. In **Matt 24** Jesus gave what is called his Olivet Discourse (because he gave it while he was on the Mount of Olives). His disciples had asked him, "**What is the sign of your coming again?**" In answer to their question, Jesus told his disciples that there would be various events or "signs" happening in the world.

For example, in the Olivet Discourse Jesus said there will be false Christs—that corresponds to the 1<sup>st</sup> seal in **Rev 6**. He said there would be “wars and rumors of war”—that corresponds to the 2<sup>nd</sup> seal. He said there would be famine—that corresponds to the 3<sup>rd</sup> seal. Jesus said there would be death and plagues—which corresponds to the 4<sup>th</sup> seal. In the Olivet Discourse he also said that believers would be persecuted and killed—which corresponds to the 5<sup>th</sup> seal.

But the important thing to remember is that, when he gave these signs, Jesus 2X specified that: “Those things must take place, but that is *not* the end” and “all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.”

All the things that are described in the Olivet Discourse and in **Rev 6** have happened for the last 2000 years and will continue to happen in the future until Christ returns. Our passage today confirms that. In **v.10** the martyrs cry out, “**How long, O Lord, will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood?**” And the answer in **v.11** is “**Wait until the full number of your brothers and sisters who are to be killed just as you have been is complete.**” IOW, this will continue until the end. And we know *that* because **vv.12-17**, the 6<sup>th</sup> seal, is a symbolic description of the *final* judgment that will occur when Jesus comes again. Those verses begin by talking about the sun becoming black and the stars falling from the sky. That is the very language used by Christ in the Olivet Discourse, **Matt 24:29**, when he described his second coming.

All this leads to a profound question:

## **II. Doesn't this make God or Christ himself evil?**

The existence of evil—especially of great evil, horrific evil, seemingly pointless evil—is why many people reject God or say that God cannot be good since he ordains or permits such inexcusable evil. This is both a philosophical issue and can be an intensely personal one. A good friend of mine stopped believing in God because, even though everyone dies, when her grandfather died—she was very close to him—she thought it was so unfair that it pushed her away from God.

These arguments against God may be very personal and emotional, but they are not valid. Why not?

- To say that the world is filled with pointless evil masks an unstated premise, namely, I don't see the point of the evil, and if it appears pointless to me then it must *be* pointless. Do we really think we are so all knowing and wise? On the other hand, God *is* all knowing and wise. He sees the end from the beginning and knows exactly how all things—the good and the evil—fit together.

Look at Joseph. There was no justification for his brothers to sell him into slavery. Then in Egypt he was unjustly accused, languished in prison, and was forgotten by a fellow-prisoner. Yet all of that was necessary for the development of his character and enabled him to become the prime minister and save thousands of people from starvation. Ultimately Joseph realized, as he told his brothers in **Gen 50**, “**You meant evil against me [and it was evil] but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.**” God was present throughout. He could see what we could not, and he used the evil to bring about good—good for Joseph and good for 1000s of others.

- More importantly, the existence of evil paradoxically leads to the conclusion that God *does* exist and that he is good. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis explains this: “**For many years I kept on feeling ‘whatever you say, and however clever your arguments are, isn't it much simpler and easier to say that the world was not made by any intelligent power?’**”

**My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? If the whole show was bad and senseless from A to Z, so to speak, why did I, who was supposed to be part of the show, find myself in such violent reaction against it? Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended on saying that the world was *really* unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my fancies. Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist—in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless—I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality—namely my idea of justice—was full of sense. Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple.”**

We can only say that something is truly evil and wrong if there is, in fact, a universal good—a standard, the “straight line” Lewis talked about—by which all people are *supposed* to live. This standard can only be grounded in something “big” enough, universal enough, sovereign enough, to establish what “good” and “evil” are. The only thing that fits that bill is God himself. If good and evil are only culturally relative, then you may not like what ISIS or the Nazis have done, but you have no basis to say that what they have done is truly, objectively, and universally wrong. It's just their “culture”; it's just your personal preference. But everyone knows and lives on the basis that some things *are* evil in and of themselves. Although the presence of great evil is used as an argument against God, paradoxically those who do not believe in God have no basis to say that *anything* is truly wrong or evil at all!

So where does this leave God? God did not create the world and then leave it, but God created the world and enters into it *as God*. At the same time, God respects people's integrity *as human beings*. He does not control us as if we were puppets or program us as if we were robots. People are able to think their own thoughts and make real choices. Therefore, the Bible repeatedly presents a *dual explanation* for events: On the one hand, God is sovereign and has ordained all events (God ordained that Joseph would be sold as a slave by his brothers); yet, on the other hand, God's ordaining events does not in any way diminish people's responsibility for the choices they make and the things they do (Joseph's brothers were not forced against their will to sell Joseph but themselves chose to do so and are accountable for their actions). In some way God works in and through His creatures to accomplish His plan, maintaining his sovereignty while at the same time people maintain their ability—and accountability—to act as they will.

This means that God does not stand behind evil in precisely the same way that he stands behind good. Although God, *in some way*, stands behind sin and evil, at the same time he stands *against* it. And he stands against it so much that he became a man who himself was subjected to unjustifiable and great evil and death in order to *take away* the world's sin and evil and give us new life. IOW, God stands behind good and evil *asymmetrically*. As one scholar puts it, **“God stands behind evil in such a way that not even evil takes place outside the bounds of his sovereignty, yet the evil is not morally chargeable to him: it is always chargeable to secondary agents, to secondary causes. On the other hand, God stands behind good in such a way that it not only takes place within the bounds of his sovereignty, but it is always chargeable to him, and only derivatively to secondary agents.”** (Carson 1990: 213)

Although this may not be fully comprehensible by us, if there is a God who is at the same time both wholly good and wholly sovereign—and there is—then it could not be otherwise. In **Rev 6** when he breaks the seals, Christ isn't forcing people to do something *against* their will but is giving people free reign to act *according to* their will. So how can we blame him when we are doing exactly what we choose to do?

### **III. WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?**

The last few minutes may have sounded very abstract and philosophical, and to a degree they were. But the fact that God is using everything—including the evil—to bring about the completion of his plan, should give us consolation, assurance, and hope. Why?

**A. First, we can know that although every evil that happens may be the act of evil people, it is not only that: God is in some way present and is using the evil ultimately for good.** That does not mean that every act is itself good, but everything is working *for* good for those who are Christ's. Joseph understood that; we can too. In our own day, a Syrian Christian recently reported, **“No suffering is like the suffering in Syria right now. . . . Before the war, not many people attended our church. We could not have imagined or dreamed about how the evangelical churches are right now. Thousands of families attend the evangelical churches—Catholics and Orthodox and Muslims. . . . One lady shared this testimony before she got baptized: ‘I lost my house, I lost my furniture, I lost everything, but I won the Lord as my Savior. I am the daughter of the Lord; I am going to heaven.’ [And] all her family came to the Lord.”** Their eternal destiny was changed directly because of the evil they experienced.

We trust the dentist when she says we need root canal surgery, even though it hurts and may debilitate us for awhile. God is more trustworthy than a dentist. We know that because, in the person of Jesus Christ, God himself suffered greatly and not just for a little while. Christ was abandoned by his own Father and in some way bore our eternities in hell so that we will never be abandoned even—or perhaps especially—in the midst of evil. This alone can put everything—every evil—into a better perspective and also can give us the ability to endure evil when we face it without falling into despair.

**B. Second, in the evil, we can have hope—not just a “hope against hope” but a solid hope.** We can have a solid hope because we know that Jesus has risen from the dead, he is coming again, and there *will* be a day of judgment in which the blood of the martyrs *will* be avenged. That was God's promise in **v.11: “Rest UNTIL the appointed time.”** There is coming a day when all the books will be balanced, every tear wiped away, and all will be made right.

Remember the last two verses of the song, “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” That song was a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He wrote it on Christmas Day 1863 as a result of his son's being severely wounded in the Civil War and his wife having recently died in a fire. The last two verses go: **“And in despair I bowed my head; There is no peace on earth, I said; For hate is strong, And mocks the song of peace on earth, good-will to men! Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men.”**

**C. But there is more to the story of evil than that.** **Rom 8:28** says that **“all things—including evil—work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose.”** One implication of this is that the evil we experience now will not just be *compensated for* (IOW, we get good things later

instead of bad things now) but will be *transformed*. The present evil will no longer be seen as something we had to endure (like root canal surgery), but it will be seen as something that actually increases our joy.

- In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis put it this way: “Mortals misunderstand. They say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bliss can make up for it,’ not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory. . . . And that is why, at the end of all things, when the sun rises here and the twilight turns to blackness down there, the Blessed will say ‘We have never lived anywhere except Heaven.’ . . . what happens to them is best described as the opposite of a mirage. What seemed, when they entered it, to be the vale of misery turns out, when they look back, to have been a well; and where present experience saw only salt deserts, memory truthfully records that the pools were full of water.”
- In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky used the same image of a mirage to say the same type of thing: “I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened with men.”
- Tim Keller recounts a personal experience along these lines: “A few years ago I had a horrible nightmare in which I dreamed that everyone in my family had died. When I awoke my relief was enormous—but there was much more than just relief. My delight in each member of my family was tremendously enriched. Why? My joy had been greatly magnified by the nightmare. My delight upon awakening took the terror up into itself, as it were, so that in the end my love for them was only greater for my having lost them and found them again. The same dynamic is at work when you lose some possession you take for granted. When you find it again (having thought it was gone forever) you cherish and appreciate it in a far deeper way.”

That is why Revelation 21 describes life on the new earth by saying that “every tear” will be wiped away and there will “no longer be any mourning or crying or pain.” That can only be true if what caused the tears, mourning, and pain has been transformed into a source of rejoicing and love and fullness. How this works, I don't know. But it *is* true and, if we are in Christ, we will experience it. Our ashes will be turned into gems, and our deserts will be turned into rivers of living water.

**CONCL:** Do we believe this? Joseph did; we can too. We may not understand why God has ordained and permitted any specific act of evil to occur. Yet we can know that he has not abandoned us: he is present, and he is using the evil to bring about the great glory of the universe and our ultimate goodness, joy, and fulfillment. Yes, evil remains evil. But paradoxically, the good that is to come will not come in *spite* of the evil, but the evil itself will be transformed for us and actually increase our joy. IOW, our eternal existence will be better *because* there was evil here and now that God has used.

For the proof, all we need to do is look at Jesus. Jesus looked at the great evil he himself would undergo on the cross, and **Isa 53:10-11** tells us [**READ to 11a**]. Jesus saw what lay ahead. He saw the evil—and it *was* evil—he himself would have to endure, *and it was all worth it*.