

Revelation 6:1-17
Christ Is On His Way
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I've never been to war, but maybe you have or know someone who has. In the last one-hundred years, the US has experienced a lot of war. We went through WWI and WWII. Then we fought in the Korean War and Vietnam. Maybe some of you remember the Cuban Missile Crisis. More recently we've had roles in the Persian Gulf War. In the mid and late 90s there was the Bosnian War and Kosovo. Then everything changed for the United States on September 11th 2001.

I was asleep in bed when the first plane hit the world trade center. I was thirteen at the time and didn't understand the War on Terror. We invaded Afghanistan and then Iraq. It seems like every year there's more and more violence. Everyone remembers the Arab Spring which hasn't ended. And now Russia, Ukraine, and the rest of the world are at odds. It seems like every other week we either hear about Iran or North Korea.

This takes its toll on all of us, whether we are personally involved or our loved ones. The Scriptures tell us that people in themselves will always be at war. We will never evolve into a better more peaceful people. We will never come to know peace outside of Jesus. Instead the Bible gives us a different perspective on conflict. It tells us that war and tragedy is a sign of God's coming kingdom. Today we're going to talk about three signs of Christ's coming kingdom. The three signs are conflict, persecution, and repentance. By the end of this message I want you to see these as signs of Christ coming. The main point of my message is simple. Conflict, persecution, and repentance are signs Christ is on his way. He is on his way as a judge, a deliverer, and a savior. Let's read 6:1-8 where we see conflict is a sign that Christ is coming as judge.

Conflict is a sign that Christ is coming as a judge. (*Read Revelation 6:1-8)

Christ is coming as a judge because the judgments come from the lamb and the throne. (6:1) Right in verse one we see that God is the source of all the judgments in Revelation 6. Verse 1 says, "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!" The lamb is another name for Jesus Christ and he is the one who opens the seals. When Jesus opens the first four seals, a cherubim says "with a voice like thunder, 'Come!'" The cherubim are the four living creatures that constantly praise God around the throne. The first is like a lion, the second an ox, the third has a man's face, and the fourth is like an eagle. So when they command the horsemen to "come" they do so by the authority of God's throne.

If we look ahead to v. 16-17 we see Jesus and the Father give their authority to these judgments. Verse 16-17 say, "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?" The people hide from the wrath of the trinity, not just Christ or just the Father. In fact, in the original language this text says "his wrath" not "their wrath." So Revelation 6:17 should say, "for the great day of his wrath has come..." John connects the throne and the wrath of the lamb to show they are one and the same God. Christ is coming as a judge because the judgments come from the lamb and the throne.

It matters that Christ is the cause of the following judgments against the earth. This helps us see conflict as part of Christ's unfolding plan instead of as senseless violence.

Conflict is a sign that Christ is coming as a judge. (6:2-8) The four horsemen of the apocalypse are probably the most famous images in Revelation. At the same time they are probably the one of the most misinterpreted images as well. To interpret them correctly we need to go back to the Old Testament book of Zechariah. Zechariah prophesied alongside the prophet Haggai at around 520 BC. The people of Israel have just returned home from their exile to Babylon. But when they came back they came home to a desolate city, temple, and nation. Haggai encouraged them to rebuild the temple and Zechariah encouraged them to trust God. Zechariah's message to trust in God comes in a time of deep uncertainty and worry. Zechariah uses the image of multi-colored horses and chariots to encourage the people persevere.

Zechariah 6:1-8 says, "Again I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four chariots came out from between two mountains. And the mountains were mountains of bronze. 2 The first chariot had red horses, the second black horses, 3 the third white horses, and the fourth chariot dappled horses—all of them strong. 4 Then I answered and said to the angel who talked with me, "What are these, my lord?" 5 And the angel answered and said to me, "These are going out to the four winds of heaven, after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth. 6 The chariot with the black horses goes toward the north country, the white ones go after them, and the dappled ones go toward the south country." 7 When the strong horses came out, they were impatient to go and patrol the earth. And he said, "Go, patrol the earth." So they patrolled the earth. 8 Then he cried to me, "Behold, those who go toward the north country have set my Spirit at rest in the north country." (ESV)

In Zechariah God uses the image of warhorses to show he will protect Israel. He sends his horses to the north because that is where Israel has just come from. God is saying to Israel you don't need to worry any more because my Spirit guards you. I haven taken care of Babylon, Assyria, Persia and the rest of your enemies. In Revelation 6 the author John expands on Zechariah's image of the four horsemen. John is writing to Christians who are in a similar time of trouble. The believers in the early church are facing death under the emperor Nero in AD 64. They are literally being burned alive to light Emperor Nero's garden. And throughout Revelation John is preparing them for even more conflict. Just like Zechariah John is telling the people of God to persevere because God is in control. They don't need to be afraid because Christ is coming to judge their enemies. Conflict is a sign that Christ is coming as a judge.

The four horsemen show us war, bloodshed, famine, and death are all signs Christ is coming. (6:2-8) The first horseman rides on a white horse and symbolizes war. (6:2) He holds a bow, wears a crown, and the text says "he came out conquering and to conquer." This horseman is clearly a demonic horsemen yet acts as an instrument of God's wrath. A bow is a symbol of war, conflict, and conquest. One commentator said "The bow is used in the OT as a symbol for divine chastisement." In other words, the white horseman stands for war and conflict. So when we see war and conflict we should remember Christ is coming.

The second horseman rides on a red horse and symbolizes bloodshed. (6:3-4) This rider's tasks is simple—to take peace from the earth so people murder each other. It's not hard to see that both this red horse and the white horse are doing their jobs. When we see people murdering and making war against each other we take it as a reminder. We remember Christ is judging the earth for its rejection of him and we pray he comes soon.

The third horseman rides on a black horse and symbolizes famine. (6:5-6) This horseman holds scales in his hands and says "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine." I've brought my scale with me today to show you the type of instrument the rider is

holding. If you drive through Chelmsford there's a picture of a scale on a green sign at the law office. All this illustration is saying is that the scales are off—that food is scarce and therefore pricey. When we see famine, hunger, and starvation, we should see these as signs Christ is coming.

The fourth horseman rides on a pale green horse and symbolizes death. (6:7-8) Although the ESV says “pale” the NASB says “ashen” and the NET says “pale green”—a deathly color. Rev 6:8 says, “And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him.” Christ is saying even when we see death we need to see this as a sign of Christ's return. Ultimately this points forward to Christ when he will finally vanquish sin and death. But until that time God is using this worst evil to usher in his kingdom.

The four horsemen show us war, bloodshed, famine, and death are all signs Christ is coming. This section ends by telling us “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.” (6:8) These four horsemen act as God's vengeance against the earth but not the whole earth. “A fourth of the earth” simply means the judgment is partial. When we see war, bloodshed, famine, and death, we remember Christ isn't finished yet.

The correct way to interpret the horsemen are as symbolic signs of Christ's coming kingdom. I don't think Scripture gives us space to interpret these horsemen in a literal manner. In other words, the red horse is not Russia. The black horse is not Germany. The white horse is not the United Kingdom. And the green horse is not Greenland. These horses are heavenly images of what Christ is doing in the midst of trial. When we try to fit everything into a literalistic box, we go odd places. I was in Florida this past weekend and I turned to a Christian television station. The preacher was talking about John Kerry's April 29th Middle Eastern peace deal. He was convinced that if this peace deal goes through, it will begin the seven year tribulation. He believed this deal would lead to the battle of Armageddon and the final return of Christ. This interpretation ignores the context of John's audience. He was reminding them that God was at work in the midst of their trials. And that one day Christ would take out his final vengeance upon all who reject him. John wasn't trying to give them a specific time frame for Christ's return, but a new view on life. We too need a new view of trouble and hardship—that it is a sign Christ is coming soon.

So when you and I see conflict on the news, the first thing we can do is simply pray. We should pray for those in the midst of conflict and war. For example right now we should be praying for peace between Russia and Ukraine. We should be praying that the gospel will bring peace to Syria and the Middle East. And we should pray that God's kingdom will come soon. The correct way to interpret the horsemen are as symbolic signs of Christ's coming kingdom.

Conflict is a sign that Christ is coming as a judge. But what's another sign of Christ's coming kingdom?

Persecution is a sign that Christ is coming as a deliverer. (*Read Revelation 6:9-11)

Persecution is a sign that Christ is coming as a deliverer (6:9) The first four seals talk about God's judgment against the world. The fifth seal talks about the world's judgment against us. Christians are not going to escape suffering in this life. We too experience the consequences of God's judgment against the world. But we don't experience God's wrath as the world does—as a judgment against them. Instead, Christians should expect to suffer and die—but as an act of deliverance by God. Nowhere in the New Testament does God promise us we will escape suffering. Instead, God promises us our suffering furthers Christianity and is a

sign of his kingdom. Revelation 6:9 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.” The souls under the altar is everyone who has been rejected by the world for the cause of Christ.

I think this is first about those who have actually died as a witness for Christ. They are under the altar because this is where the blood from sacrifices would drain. Just like Christ was sacrificed so too they have been rejected and sacrificed by the world. The altar also symbolizes closeness to God and that’s why I think all the saints are also here. Rev 8:5 says “the prayers of all the saints [are offered] on the golden altar before the throne.” So the testimony of martyrs and all who have been persecuted are constantly before Christ. When you and I are shamed for Christ our prayers mingle with those of the martyrs. It doesn’t matter how big or little our sacrifice is, God will vindicate our witness for him.

All persecution no matter how big or little is holy to the Lord. (6:10-11) A few weeks ago Pastor Dana mentioned the suffering of Christians in North Korea. The North Korean dictator Kim Jung Un recently ordered that 33 Christians be put to death. They are part of an underground church working alongside a South Korean Baptist missionary. This missionary and those who work with him have started around 500 underground churches. They were charged with attempting to overthrow the government and will be put to death. There are between 50,000 to 70,000 Christians imprisoned in North Korean labor camps. Christ hears their prayers in the midst of suffering and he will exact justice.

The saints before the throne cry out with a loud voice for God to avenge their blood. “...how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” These saints aren't calling out for selfish vengeance but for holy justice. Christ clothes them in the white robes of holiness and purity and tells them to wait. Before he will return you and I still have to suffer in Christ’s name. We too can pray that Christ will come and prove himself true. And we can rejoice when we are rejected by the world and culture.

My sister-in-law is attending a university in Boston. She is taking a screenwriting class and is writing a movie whose main character is Jewish. As part of this class her classmates have to give her feedback on her script. When they read her script they were all impressed with her knowledge of Jewish culture. So they asked her how it was that she knew so much about Jewish culture. And she replied, “Well, I am a Christian.” That changed the whole tone of their meeting. One classmate got very uncomfortable and the other said, “Oh, you’re a Christian...” My sister-in-law walked away from that class excited that she had been shamed for Christ. Let this be an encouragement to us to rejoice in Christ as the world rejects us too. All persecution no matter how big or little is holy to the Lord.

Conflict and persecution are signs that Christ is coming as a judge and deliverer. But I think our passage points to one more sign—the sign of repentance.

Repentance is a sign that Christ is coming as a savior. (*Read Revelation 6:12-17)

Christ extends his grace so that we may repent (6:12-15) The opening of the sixth seal is the beginning of God’s final judgment. Here we see a partial picture of what the end of days will look like for those who don’t repent. The whole earth will testify that the people of the earth were wrong and that Jesus is Lord. Scripture says there will be signs in the earth and in the heavens. There will be earthquakes, stars will fall, and

mountains will shake. But notice that the seventh and final seal has not yet come. We don't see the seventh seal until chapter eight because even now God extends his grace.

Chapter seven is inserted between the sixth and seventh seals show us God's forbearance. A bank shows you forbearance when it delays collecting on your student loans. Often banks won't collect on student loans up to six months after graduation. This doesn't mean you don't owe them money, but that they are waiting to collect. God shows us forbearance when he doesn't collect the debt we owe him. Every person owes God a debt they can't repay. Jesus Christ is coming to collect his due, and you can either pay out of your account or his. The gap in God's final judgment reminds us God extends grace longer than we deserve. This break tells us that even now there is still a space to repent but it will not last.

Revelation 8:1 and 5 say, "1 When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour... 5 Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake." Revelation gives us several pictures of the final judgment (4:5, 8:5, 11:19, and 16:18-21). Each of these endings has "flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder..." They are the final markers in the text that Christ has indeed come. But for now Christ extends his grace so that we may repent

Repentance is a sign that Christ is coming as a savior. (6:16-17) When you repent and put your faith in Christ, this is a sign of God's coming kingdom. God is gathering his people and with every new believer we are one soul closer to the end. Our text ends by telling us those who do not repent will not be able to stand on the last day. The people of the earth will fall down in rebellious worship before God because they must. But God offers us all a chance to fall down in willing worship today. So on that last day, who can stand? You and I will stand if we repent and follow Christ. But if you do not believe, I am warning you right now that the end is drawing near. There is still an opportunity to repent but Scripture doesn't say how long it will last. The signs are everywhere that God's kingdom is coming. Conflict, persecution, and repentance are signs Christ is on his way. Repent and believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. (Acts 16:31) Repentance is a sign that Christ is coming as a savior.

On March 1st, 2014 the Navy commissioned their newest warship the USS Somerset. The USS Somerset is named after Somerset county where United Flight 93 crashed. This warship is the last of three newly built ships named after the victims of 9/11. The Navy is already using the USS New York and USS Arlington. Some of the steel from the World Trade Center and Pentagon helped build these vessels. Steel from a crane in Pennsylvania helped build the USS Somerset. This boat has two 30 mm cannons, two air-defense missile launchers, and can carry four helicopters.

This war vessel is a picture of the type of justice God is preparing for the world and his saints. These boats were forged in memory of those who were murdered just a few years ago. God is preparing his own vessel of judgment in memory of all of his saints. The very prayers and cries of martyrs and the persecuted are before God. One day the wrath of the lamb will be poured out on behalf of his people. Christ will one day vindicate all who have given testimony in his name. The signs of God's kingdom tell us that Jesus Christ is on the move. Conflict, persecution, and repentance are signs Christ is on his way.

Conflict is a sign that Christ is coming as a judge. Persecution is a sign that Christ is coming as a deliverer. Repentance is a sign that Christ is coming as a savior. When Christ comes, how will you receive him? Will

you receive him as a condemning judge or as your deliverer and savior? Conflict, persecution, and repentance are signs Christ is on his way.