

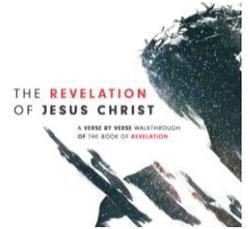
Title: Revelation, Part 14: How to Live Today with the Future in Mind

Speaker: Charles Stone

Passage: Rev. 6:1-17

Big idea: As John explains his vision about the end times, 5 insights can help us face the future with confidence.

Memory verse of the month: Rev 7: 17 For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.



One of the common desires in the human heart and mind for many people, is to know what's coming next, to know the future. If we know what's coming, it gives us a measure of control that perhaps if we don't like what's coming up, we can change something now to change the future, or so goes our thinking. Knowing the future piques our curiosity.

If we had some kind of worm hole into the future that we could peek into maybe we could answer all kinds of questions. Who will I marry? How will my kids turn out? What vocation will I be happiest in? How much money will I have in the bank before I retire? What will retirement be like? What will I look like when I'm old?

The fascination many have about the book of Revelation indicates this curiosity. So does the popularity of horoscopes and the common practice of setting goals for the future. Sci-fi movies about time travel into the future or what the future world will look like scratch this itch.

But, we really can't know the future. However, Revelation gives us a glimpse into the world's final days through the vision that the Apostle John recorded when he wrote the book Revelation that we have been studying in this series.

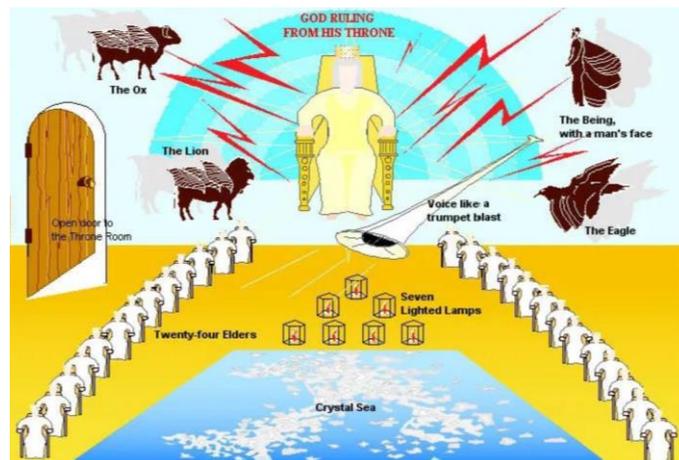
I've titled my message, *How to live today with the future in mind.*

Let's come up to speed from where we have been. Revelation was written in an historical context of difficulty and persecution for the early Christian Church. They needed encouragement that God was in charge and that he will one day make all things right. God showed John this incredible vision about things to come and he wrote it down in the book of Revelation.

We've seen John's vision of this heavenly throne room with all these things in it.

"Heavens-Throne Room"

- Door
- Trumpet
- Throne
- rainbow
- 24 other thrones
- Lightning
- Lamps
- Sea
- Lion
- Ox
- the being with man's face
- flying eagle



Last week something new appeared, a scroll in God's hand as he sat on the throne. This scroll revealed the end times, how history will come to end, with God's blessings upon the faithful and judgment upon those who rejected him.

This scroll was sealed with seven seals. A seal was a string wrapped around it with wax pressed in by a seal or a signet ring. No one was found worthy to open this scroll but Jesus. In some way this scroll was constructed so that you could break one seal at a time and see part of the contents of the scroll. That brings us to this chapter which deals with the opening of the first six seals. Next week in chapter 7 we will look at what gets revealed with the 7th seal.

As I read this chapter, you're going to hear some fantastic images in this vision which will cause you to ask, what does that mean?

Remember, Revelation was written as somewhat of a kind of code so that believers could understand it and unbelievers not. Otherwise, if those in the Roman government understood these things (which pointed to the downfall of the great worldly kingdoms of the world including Rome), the persecution of the Christians would get even worse because they would be seen as subversives. And the Christians needed comforting and needed to be reminded that God is in control, that he will pour out his blessings on his followers, and that in the end he would bring perfect justice upon those who have rejected him and persecuted his followers.

From this point forward in the book, biblical scholars interpret the visions in different ways. I don't purport to be an expert but will give you my best understanding of these difficult to understand images. In some cases, I may say, I don't know what this means.

However, [every plausible interpretation have these in common. They ...](#)

- [are about the future...](#) (Keep in mind that the book was written in the context of the then current culture and historical events)
- [mean something...](#)
- [are still somewhat obscure..](#) because we can't suppose we understand a prophecy in minute detail until after the prophecy occurs
- [become more clear over time....](#) Time and history sheds new light on them. There have been many predictions that this image in Revelation referred to this event or that person in history and that Jesus was to return on a such and such a date. Well, he hasn't yet, and many of those predictions didn't happen, so we know that was not what the prophecy meant.

Before I read it, here's the big idea:

Big idea. As John explains his vision about the end times, we learn 5 insights can help us move into the future with confidence in God.

The scripture I'm going to read is [Revelation 6.1-17](#) Let's stand as we read the scripture.

Rev. 6:1 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!" ² 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. ³ When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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!" ⁷ When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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?" ¹¹ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was

completed.¹² 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,¹³ and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind.¹⁴ The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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!”¹⁷ For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

That’s a lot to process. By way of a summary of that chapter and preview as we go into more detail, watch this 2-minute animation from the Bible Project that explains this chapter.

- <https://bibleproject.com/learn/revelation/> 5.33-7.13

So this vision in the rest of the book include several 7’s. Here 7 seals and later we have 7 bowls and 7 trumpets and 7 judgments. These sevens are like what the animation said, **Russian nesting dolls** with each subsequent seven arising from the prior one, describing the same series of events from a different perspective with each building into a progressive crescendo to the final judgment.



So John watches as the Lamb, Jesus, breaks each seal one at a time to reveal the scroll’s contents upon which one of the four living creatures announces the appearance of one of 4 horses with some other details that help us understand what that part of the vision means. Together these are sometimes called the 4 horsemen of the apocalypse. And these four calamities may occur simultaneously or consecutively.

Fundamentally, these first four form a unity showing the self-defeating character of sin and demonstrate the descent of people falling deeper and deeper into depravity and the self-destructiveness of sin as time progresses toward the last days. And these 4 colored horses are mentioned in the OT book of Zechariah.

Each of these images with the colored horse explains a component of what kinds of things will occur as we near the end times.

Here’s a picture that summarizes these 7 seals.





When the first seal is opened a white horse appears with a bow and rides out bent on conquest.

Scholars are split as to what this white horse image refers to. Some say it is Christ on a white horse in his victory controlling these other forces represented by the next three horses. Others say it represents something else. I'm going to give you the second perspective because it seems to fit with the general tone of this vision and because these first four seem to be a unit. I could be wrong but that's the direction I'm taking. This white could even represent an attempt by these forces to oppress believers through deception, imitating Christ on a white horse.

The image of an archer on a white horse would strike terror into Romans because one of the groups that defeated them were the Parthians, one of Rome's most feared enemies because of their archers who were extremely accurate as they rode on white horses. So, the reader or listener to this vision would have an immediate connection knowing about these archers.

So, the white horse probably represents [conquest by war](#).

Increased war will be a part of the events happening toward the end times. And war results in carnage, discord, and bloodshed. We might even say that the first rider summarizes war and the next three horses give detail to what war can cause.



When the second seal is opened a red horse appears with a large sword and was given the power to take away peace.

The sword was a symbol of Roman rule. Red was also associated with war. The implication is that the base human traits of greed and lust for power and money assert themselves resulting in no peace, even within people groups and countries.... So this red horse relates to [civil war](#), that will happen with an increasing frequency, nations warring against themselves, conquerors turning on themselves.

This taking of peace from the earth that this image represents results in relationships disintegrating, hate, every man for himself, division, competitive ambition, selfish desire, person against person, people against people, and nation against nation. In the end times the world will become a seething cauldron on embittered hate.

The third and fourth seal denote more effects of war.

When the third seal is opened a black horse appears with [scales](#) in its rider's hands.



The scales represent [famine/food scarcity](#).

A merchant would use scales to make sure he got paid accurately for his goods. John describes food here in a few ways. The reader and the listener would have connected with these descriptions because they knew about drought and its effects on food availability and price for they had experienced it. They also understood scarcity when inflation or excessive taxation make it difficult to have enough money to feed their families. By mentioning wine and oil he's hinting that in the end times there would be a great disparity between the rich who could afford the best of food (wine and oil) and the poor who could barely make it.

Many in the west don't face this as much as the rest of the world, but you'd be surprised how many do struggle with being able to afford healthy food for their families. In fact nearly one in three people across the planet — 2.37 billion people — did not have access to sufficient food last year, an increase of almost 320 million people in a single year, exacerbated by the pandemic.

And in general, the wealthier have financially done better in the covid shutdowns than the poor.

A few weeks ago, I noted that Christians who would not compromise their faith in some of these ancient churches had limited access to buying goods in the market and to getting good jobs, because they would not worship Caesar.

Now, when the fourth seal is opened a pale horse appears and John writes that death and hades followed.



I think this one refers to [disease/pestilence](#). This color suggests disease and death. He's picturing such wasting disease that it kills so many that wild beasts roam lands that had once been inhabited.

So these four together represent conquest by war, civil war, drought/food scarcity, and disease.

After the four horsemen, a new scene opens, the response of those who have been persecuted and martyred for their faith.

Remember, this was written in a real historical context. This vision applies to the Roman empire and to the fact that conquest, war, famine, and pestilence and death repeat in history and will repeat until the final judgment cycle and will increase as we get closer to the end times.

Now the fifth seal is broken, picturing the cries of the martyrs, an altar, and white robes.



This image represents [persecuted Christians](#).

They are pictured as crying out to God and asking him how long it will be before God avenges them. Throughout history there has been a persistent hostility toward deeply committed Christians on the part of those in power.¹ And from a human perspective it appears that the martyrs have been defeated by the enemies of God. They've been killed. But a white robe God is giving them was a token of their ultimate triumph, purity, and innocence, a reminder of God's promise for future and final glory, that ultimate victory belongs to God and those who have died for their faith. God has not forgotten and he will reward them greatly and will judge those who persecuted them.

You may have thought it was odd for these martyrs to pray for God to avenge them. Aren't we supposed to turn the other cheek and pray for our enemies. Yes, we are. But they aren't praying for an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. This is not a prayer of revenge. Rather, they are praying that a just God will appropriately render perfect justice that only he can render. It is a plea for the reversal of the world's judgment on God's people. The God of the Bible is a god of love and grace, and holiness and judgment. Evil doers will not get away with it.

Last week I talked about an altar with bowls of incense on it used in the tabernacle for worship. Incense, which is pleasing to the smell was likened to how the prayers of God's people, especially the prayers of those who have been persecuted for Christ, please God. So he reaches back with this image of the altar to speak of the souls of those who had

¹ Morris, L. (1987). [Revelation: an introduction and commentary](#) (Vol. 20, p. 108). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

been martyred, and most certainly as they faced their death, some of their last thoughts and words were prayers that God heard and cherished and promised to avenge.

By the way, persecution of Christians is just something that happened in ancient history. It is happening today and growing. During this service a Christian was killed or imprisoned for their faith and that happens every hour of every day. Between October 2019 and September 2020, more than 340 million Christians were living in countries where they might suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination because of their faith.

Covid-19 acted as a catalyst for religious persecution through relief discrimination, forced conversion, and as justification for increasing surveillance and censorship.



The sixth seal is now opened and uses cataclysmic language to describe God's final judgment in history. These verses picture a general time of great upheaval, calamity, worldwide chaos, economic and political systems will be upended in the final days of the final judgment. As the end times approach, we will see more frequent cataclysmic earth events like earthquakes and volcanoes and tidal waves and fires and tornadoes and hurricanes and drought or even celestial events.

Their point is that John is taking every terrifying thing that can be imagined and piling them all together to give a picture of the terrors of the end time on everyone who rejects Christ no matter their wealth, power, or socio-economic standing. The impact of the consequences of these cataclysmic events would extend to everyone, no matter their status.

There will be a final judgment day, a day of reckoning for everyone who rejects Jesus. For those who believe, joy, peace, happiness, eternal satisfaction with God in heaven. For those who rejected Jesus, regret, judgement, absence of anything good, multiplied sorrow for eternity.

Even those hardened against God will realize in that day, this is the end.

That's a lot of tough material to work through. Let's go back to our big idea.

As John explains his vision about the end times, 5 insights can help us move into the future with confidence in God.

Insight 1: Life for can be unfair and difficult.



I've committed my life to Jesus. I follow him, love him, serve him, honor him with my resources, yet, these things happen to me. I'm barely making it financially or my health continues to decline or my relationships are not improving. Or, I'm suffering for my faith in Jesus at work. People shun me because I stand for Jesus. Or, in some places, people are dying for their faith because they followed Jesus.

Life can be unfair for the Christian. Suffering happens to believers.

Ultimately suffering either hardens the hearts of unbelievers or purifies the hearts of believers and refines their faith. The Psalms help us understand this process of handing over our suffering to the Lord. 40% of the Psalms are called laments that include four parts.

Laments in the Psalms include 4 parts:

1. An address to God
2. Pouring out their hearts to God about their suffering.
3. Asking God to alleviate it.
4. Expressing trust in God.

Suffering well helps us become more resilient, helps us accept our weaknesses, challenges our ideas of being in control which can create greater trust in the Lord, helps us re-orient our lives toward what should be our priorities, gives us a deeper appreciation for life and helps us make better meaning of life. Jesus was our model on how to respond in suffering.

So life can be tough for Christians.

Insight 2: We don't surprise God with our difficult questions.



In John's vision he heard the martyrs from the past ask the Lord how long would it be before justice is served against those who persecuted and killed them. How long is a fair question. It didn't surprise God. And our tough questions to God don't surprise him. It's better to pose those questions, admit them, wrestle with them even though we may not get answers this side of heaven rather than ignoring or stuffing them which can make them lethal to our soul.

So, ask him those questions, but don't become bitter or walk away when you don't get clear answers.

Insight 3: God will vindicate his followers who have suffered for their faith.



That's the gist of these last verses that God notices our suffering and causes it and because he is perfect he can perfectly render justice to those who have hurt us. He will vindicate us.

Insight 4: Stay the course.



God answered those martyrs question and when by answering, a little longer. Those are great word to remind us that we must stay the course. Our obedience to Jesus in difficult times will pay off. We will reap great rewards for our spiritual investment here on earth. The time has not yet come for the final judgment, but God promises that he will make all things right.

John explains why those believers suffered when he wrote, "because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained." They stayed the course, obeyed God's word and kept their testimony.

Jesus will be completely victorious. He won the ultimate victory over sin and death on the cross and through his resurrection. But he still has some mop-up operations to go.

Insight 5: We don't need to fear the future.



These visions point to pretty bleak time before the final judgment. It feels like our world is on a rapid decline morally and a rapid decline in the freedoms we've been used to. But God reigns on his throne. Jesus is executing His plan. His spirit lives in each of us to strengthen us and give us wisdom to navigate the days ahead.

I want to emphasize this insight.

Insight 4: Stay the course.



What is one way you can become more consistent in your daily walk with Jesus? How can you stay the course this next week? That's my assignment for you.