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General idea: The Lamb breaks the next two seals as God's Judgment is being poured out to the world. Witnesses now include the martyrs, those of faith who have fallen by persecution and unjust death. They are crying out to God, whom they feel is taking too long. But, God is patient and allows His perfect timing to unfold even when we are impatient and do not fully understand His grace and love or how He judges. This passage shows a time of anticipation turning to a climax, and excitement replacing the waiting; all in the universe are in awe. God again shows His faithfulness to those who have been faithful to Him, as He finally avenges those who are just, who have suffered. Imagine all those who have wronged you, who have been evil and cruel, finally getting their just reward. How sweet it is to see God's judgment, yet how fearful it is to know it is here. In the meantime, God asks us to wait and trust in Him and His perfect timing. He clothes us with His grace and faithfulness. We can trust Him even when we have been wronged, persecuted, and even if we lose our lives.

The climatic wonders of judgment imagery astound our senses and imagination as God reveals to us His sovereignty and power. All that was there disappears and reforms, and all who are there hide in fear and awe, crying to die rather than face what is happening. All this is in a context and magnitude we have yet to comprehend. These are such reassuring words to those who are oppressed and/or trust God, but such fearful words to those who are self-reliant and/or complacent.

Vs. 9-11: The Fifth Seal of God's Sovereign will is opened, witnessed by those who have received injustice and are awaiting their revenge. This is not the kind of revenge that the world seeks as in the settling of scores, nor is it the selfish desires that we see in the world. Rather, it is the desire to see God's pure, true justice, His comforting law restored and applied, and a "can't wait for it" attitude for His holiness to be revealed.

- *Under the altar* refers to the blood from the slaughtered animals of the Old Testament sacrificial ritual, as the blood is drained out from the base of the altar (Ex. 29:12; Lev. 4:7-25, 24; 5:9; 8:15; 9:9).
- *Souls of those who had been slain* refers to those who have been martyred because they remained faithful to Christ. It denotes suffering, injustice, and persecution, but the application is that they remained true to the faith, regardless of circumstances. In context, this image indicates that the martyrs are like sacrifices, just as Christ was when he represented the Passover Lamb, innocent and undeserving, whose blood was shed. In Christ's case, it was for our redemption; in the martyr's case, it was seemingly in vain, but in reality, it glorified God (Phil. 2:6-11).
- *How long* was an Old Testament prayer of entreaty, as making an appeal before God for vindication, seeking that the duration of suffering be limited, or for judgment to come sooner (Psalm 79:5-10; Isa. 6:11; Jer. 47:6; Zech. 1:12).
- *Inhabitants of the earth* refers to all of humanity being divided up in two sections that cut across race and place: the people who belong to God, who are elected and redeemed, and those who are rebellious, who reject the Truth, remaining in sin and who are hostile to God (Phil. 3:10, 20; Rev. 8:13; 11:10; 13:3,8-14; 17:2,8).
- *Avenge our blood* is an *axiom*, a cry for vindication or retribution for the righteous who have been wronged. In Jesus' time, this referred to guilt laid upon those who took innocent lives. God is the One who is to avenge (Gen. 4:8-10; Duet. 32:43; 2 Chron. 24:20-22; Psalm 70: 10; Zech 1:1; Matt. 23:35).
- *White robe*. In ancient times, *white* was normally associated with good and purity, depending on the context. In describing a priest, it meant honor, blessedness, and purity; as with a "horse," it meant conquest. In contrast, black was associated with bad. The dead were buried in white and priests were dressed in white (Rev. 3:4-5,18; 4:4; 7:9, 13; 19:14).
- *Told to wait a little* refers to God's predetermined sovereignty. He is in control and bows to no one's schedule. In answer to the question of *how long to the end?* God's reply is *in His time*, which is perfect. Until the full number has been reached, many see this as the call of the church to expand and proclaim the

Kingdom until it comes to its fruition (Apocalyptic books of 1 Enoch 47:4 and 2 Esdras 4:35-37; Rom. 16:26; 1 Tim 3:16; Gal. 3:8; Rev. 10:11).

There are two main schools of thought in this chapter, as the horsemen and astronomic phenomena are symbols of judgment and not necessarily literal beings and events. First, the horseman is symbolic for Christ as He fulfills the judgment as the context suggests in the following chapters; secondly, the horsemen are angels as the passage states, or symbols for judgment. Now, you can see how this is a subject for debate. The issue is not who or what they are; rather, it is what they are doing. They are pouring out God's judgment as this passage is now attesting to (Matt. 24:6-8).

Vs. 12-17: The Sixth Seal is opened and it is given to us in cataclysmic, exaggerated language and metaphors often used for God's judgments and the end of days (Judg. 5:20; Psalm 18; Isa. 13:10-17; Jer. 4:20-28; Joel 2:10, 31; Acts 2:20). For in Jewish apocalyptic and poetic literature such as the Old Testament, and apocryphal literature such as "Profetes," "Sibylline Oracles," "Petronius," "4 Maccabees"; "4 Ezra," "1 Enoch," "Joseph and Asenath," "Jubilees," "Simititudes of Enoch," and the "Qumran Texts," to name the main ones (there are many more), as well as in the culture then, these images are "metaphoric," or symbols of specific themes in judgment. The obvious is that the actuality of this passage is pointing to God's power, but these events are not necessarily *verbatim*, as it would be seemingly impossible. How could one star, much less billions upon billions land on this planet that is a billion times a billion smaller? The answer is it is figurative, and it is a mystery how this will be eventually played out and what we will see. This is a depiction, just as a first century Jew would read and write. What we do know is it will not be the same! The point of this passage tells us that no one is immune from experiencing God's judgment. The entirety of the universe will bear witness to God's will as incredible phenomenon, displayed in the cosmos, will herald Christ's Second Coming (Mark 13:24-26; Luke 2:25-27).

- *Great earthquake* is often associated with end times and divine visitations (Ex. 19:18; Isa. 2:19; Hag. 2:6; Zech. 14:4-5; Ezek. 38:20; Amos 8:8). Severe earthquakes often devastated these seven churches and the Asia Minor region. Such imagery was absolutely terrifying as everything would be lost.
- *The sun turned black* refers to "darkness" as a sign of judgment, as God did with Pharaoh. This does not mean the sun will literally go dark, as all life in our solar system would perish instantly. However, if God chose to do so, He could because He can do anything (Ex. 10:21-23; Isa. 13:9-10; 24:23; 50:3; Ezek. 32:7-8; Amos 5:18; 8:9; Joel 2:10, 31).
- *Moon turned blood red* may refer to an unusual lunar eclipse or even something more spectacular. These events being described are not literal, astronomic events as many today think.
- *Stars in the sky fell to earth* means the cosmic scope of God's judgment, as all will be affected (Isa. 34:4). This was also a sign for the coming of Christ (Mark 13:25-26). It may also refer to angels coming down or some stunning event that all will see in the sky (Isa. 24:21; Dan. 8:10; 10:13; Rev. 12:4).
- *Late figs* refers to the green figs that grow in the winter after the leaves have fallen, ones that easily fall off the tree in winds.
- *The sky receded like a scroll* refers to Isaiah 34:4 and how a reader would open a scroll with the right hand and then roll it up with the left. This meant the End of Days is at hand. Some see this as *Armageddon* (Jer. 4:24 or Nah. 1:5; Rev. 16:16, 20; 20:11).
- *Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man.* Here are seven typical castes of people in the ancient world, but not different kinds. All are either saved or are in sin. Seven means completeness, so this means God's judgment will be complete and perfect and not have any social, class, or economic barriers to it. God vindicates us! It is judgment time for those people who are unjust and evil oppressors. These are comforting and encouraging words for those who are being oppressed by the rich and mighty, as vindication is in sight.

- *General* was a Roman commander who led a “cohort” or “Legion” of 1,000 men.
- *Hid in caves*. People will seek to conceal themselves from God’s wrath, but it will not work, for God is all seeing and all knowing (Judg. 6:2; Isa. 2:10-20; 13:6; Jer 4:29; Hosea 10:8).
- *Wrath has come, and who can stand*. Judgment is coming (Joel 2:11; Mal. 3:2). God’s wrath and righteousness are a reality; Christ covers our sin for us (Zeph. 1:14-18; Na. 1:6; Mal. 3:2; Rom. 1:18; 3:9-23; 6:23; Rev.19:15). This is also rhetorical to those in Christ and not meant as condescending to those who are faithful. There is hope and assurance when our trust is in Christ. He is our hope even when the very foundations of the universe are collapsing around and under us. When our hope is in Christ, nothing can shake us (Luke 12:32-34; 1 Cor. 7:29-31; Heb. 12:25-29).

Notice that as each seal is broken, a dramatic, picturesque scene opens, leading to the climax of His Second Coming in the following chapters.

Talking about judgment is not a “happy-go-lucky” subject; it is a reality. Judgment is about His grace and His love. How can this be love? Because, love protects and love cares. If there were no consequences for inappropriate action and sin, then love would be absent and God would not care for His creation or the ones He has chosen to elect (Rev. chaps 7; 10-11). Yet, His judgment is His grace; His love is there, and His care is there, protecting His saints. We are His, and when we are His, we have no need for worry, fear, or doubt in what will happen. We can trust Him; we have no need to fear these events that one day will come about in their fruition.

The Preterist view: They see this passage as taking place prior to 70 A.D., and the Christians in the early church suffering as they are slain like animals by Jewish oppressors. Their blood cries out for vengeance; they are still being persecuted and Jerusalem is judged for it (Matt. 23:35; 24:29-34; Luke 13:1-3). The preponderance of this passage is its symbolic imagery dealing with the Olivet Discourse of Jesus and the destruction and judgment of Jerusalem (Mal. 3:2). The astronomic imagery refers to the end of the Temple as corresponding to the fall of Edom (Isa. 34:4; Ezek. 32:7-8). The *hiding in the caves* is literal, as the Christians did this during the Roman carnage of Jerusalem. This view is perhaps an application of the passage but misses the main point.

The Futurist view: They see this passage as the state of the tribulation taking place in the future. The *souls crying out* are the people remaining after the rapture who are suffering during the tribulation. They see the Martyrs either as not Christians, or people converted after the rapture. The astronomic imagery refers to the catastrophes that the last days will entail, the scope of thought ranging from the literal to the representative, as signs in the heavens. Such things include literal earthquakes, civil wars, government oppressions or breakdowns, nuclear war, volcanic eruptions, terror, and chaos. Subsequently, there are several schools of speculative thought on how and when the rapture and tribulation comes about from this passage, even though this passage does not teach anything close to it. This view makes for good novels and fun discussions, but not good, biblical theology. The rest of this passage they see as the representation of Christ’s martyrdom.

The Idealist view: They see this passage as symbolic for the suffering church, including political upheavals through the ages, the faithful who have died crying out for relief and vengeance, and those who cry out for justice. This passage’s main theme is sacrificial essence and character of the faithful. Also, it is about the distinctions of people who live for God versus the people who live for themselves and evil (1 Pet. 4:6; Heb. 12:26; Rev. 4:13). They see this passage as still dealing with the Seven Churches and as metaphorical for God’s judgment. They do not see the great Judgment appearing until chapter 20. Thus, the astronomic imagery is the judgment for Jerusalem and Rome for their persecution of the Christians. Some, having this viewpoint, share similar beliefs to the Historicists. This view is an application of the passage, but, again, misses the main point.

The Historicist view: They see this passage as comforting those who are being persecuted, as God consoling them. They see these sufferings happening under the emperor Diocletian (384-303 A.D.) and/or Maximian (270-383 A.D.), called the “era of the martyrs” in church history because of the carnage and suffering the church endured. The images represent the fall of paganism and the rise of Christianity in the world, from the time of the Romans on to today. After this period, Constantine became Emperor and Christianity slowly became accepted and then became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Others see this passage as the Christians suffering by Jewish oppression in the early church. The earthquakes represent spiritual revolution,

and the astronomic imagery is earthly dignitaries in rebellion to God and/or the shaking of Jerusalem for its evil. This view is an application of the passage but also misses the main point.

The Essential Inductive Questions (for more Inductive questions see [Inductive Bible Study](#)):

1. What does this passage say?
2. What does this passage mean?
3. What is God telling me?
4. How am I encouraged and strengthened?
5. Is there sin in my life for which confession and repentance is needed?
6. How can I be changed, so I can learn and grow?
7. What is in the way of these precepts affecting me? What is in the way of my listening to God?
8. How does this apply to me? What will I do about it?
9. What can I model and teach?
10. What does God want me to share with someone?

Additional Questions:

1. What would be your fears and emotions if these seals were opened and suddenly this stuff started to happen? What does it mean to remain true to the faith, regardless of circumstances?
2. What do you see as the point of this passage? Which of these four views appeals to you? Are there characteristics from each one that are plausible or true, are they all nuts, or are they perhaps a bit of both?
3. How does this passage bring reassuring words to those who are oppressed or are suffering? How does this passage bring fearful words to those who are self-reliant and/or are complacent?
4. Why does God now include the martyrs as the witnesses? Who do you think the martyrs are? Why are they crying out to God? Would you?
5. How does it make you feel that God is patient and allows His perfect timing to unfold even in sufferings and what we see as chaos? What about when compared to our thinking and feelings of timing?
6. Do you see the excitement and awe in this passage? How does God again show His faithfulness? How does He show His faithfulness and love to you?
7. Have you been wronged or been a victim of injustice or oppression? How would you feel to see those who harmed you finally getting their just reward? Would it be sweet to you? Or, would God's judgment make you fearful?
8. Why does God sometimes ask us to wait and trust in Him and His perfect timing when we are suffering? How is Judgment also God's grace and love?
9. Do you believe that when your hope is in Christ, nothing can shake you? How so? Why not? What can you do to have the assurance that He is in control and bows to no one's schedule? How do you feel about the fact that God is the One who is to avenge, and not us?
10. *The issue here is not who or what the images are; rather, it is what they are doing and pointing to, which is God pouring out His judgment.* Do you consider this statement to be true, false, or what?
11. What area in your life are you trying to hide from God? Why? What can you do to be more trusting by allowing Christ into your inner most thoughts, fears, aspirations, secrets, and life?
12. What does it mean that God clothes us with His grace and faithfulness? How does this help you get through the tough times of life? How can you focus on Christ and trust Him even when you have been wronged or persecuted, or even if you would lose your life?