

The Seals of Justice & Judgement

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[0 : 00] Well, if we could, this evening, with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling, if we could turn back to that portion of scripture that we read, the book of Revelation, Revelation chapter 6.

As I said, we're just picking up where we left off last time. So, Revelation chapter 6 at verse 9, where John writes, 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.

They cried out with a loud voice, O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth.

Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

And so on. I don't know if you read it, but a couple of weeks ago, there was an article on the Free Church website about some books that had been donated to Shorts Prison in North Lanarkshire.

[1 : 28] HMP Shorts, it has 553 prison cells, where a number of inmates, they meet each week for worship.

When I was in the Free Church College, I had the privilege of going into HMP Edinburgh, and it was very interesting to spend time with the worshippers there. But in the Shorts Prison, one prisoner said about the donation of Psalm books, he said, The words are amazing. The Psalms teach us how to go about things when we're struggling throughout our life, no matter what has happened to us.

And one of the prison chaplains, he also said, The joy of singing the Psalms in prison is that God's word is not just being sung, it's being memorised. And you know, it's wonderful to know that prisoners are being exposed to the Psalms, because as a congregation, we love the Psalms. Because in the Psalms, we're taught that all of, just like all of Scripture, we're taught what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man. And what we've been singing about this evening from the Psalms, we've been singing in our different Psalms, we've been singing that the God we worship is a God of justice and a God of judgment.

The God we worship is a God of justice and a God of judgment. And I was thinking, well, if anyone knows anything about justice and judgment, it would be those prisoners who now have new Psalm books in Shorts Prison.

[2 : 55] And yet the God they worship and the God we worship is a God who reveals himself to us in the book of Psalms as a God of justice and a God of judgment.

We sang earlier in Psalm 36, those familiar words, Thy mercies, Lord, are in the heavens. Thy truth doth reach the clouds. Thy justice is like mountains great.

Thy judgments deep as floods. We also sang from Psalm 9. We just sang it there. In verse 7, And God shall endure for a, He doth for judgment set his throne.

And righteousness to judge the world. Justice to give each one. And later on we'll sing from Psalm 89. And I want us to keep the words of Psalm 89 in our mind.

What it says there in, I think it's verse 14 and 15, Justice and judgment of thy throne are made the dwelling place. Mercy accompanied with truth shall go before thy face.

[3 : 53] And those Psalms, these Psalms we're singing this evening, they remind us and they reaffirm to us that the God we worship is a God of justice and a God of judgment. And that's because God's throne, God's throne is a throne of justice and a throne of judgment.

God's throne is a throne of justice and a throne of judgment. Psalm 89, Justice and judgment of thy throne are made the dwelling place.

And you know, it's those words from Psalm 89 that I want us to take into this passage here in Revelation chapter 6. Because as we reflect together on the fifth and sixth seal being opened, we see that the fifth and the sixth seal they set before us, God's justice and God's judgment. They just explain to us Psalm 89. They are the fulfillment and the fruition of Psalm 89, where justice and judgment of thy throne are made the dwelling place.

So the fifth seal is God's justice. And the sixth seal we see is God's judgment. So first of all, as we look at the fifth seal, we see God's justice.

[5 : 08] God's justice. We read there in verse 9, Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

Now, as you know, and as we've said many times before in our study of this book, the book of Revelation, it's one long revelation. And it's a revelation from Jesus Christ, about Jesus Christ, and it's all for the church of Jesus Christ.

But at the time, the church was being persecuted. All of the apostles had, by this point, been executed for their faith, except for the author of this book, the apostle John. John was exiled to the Greek island of Patmos.

And as we know from chapter 1, while he was praying on the Lord's day, he received this revelation, this apocalypse, this apocalypse, where the Lord lifts the lid and he removes the veil in order to reveal Jesus Christ as the risen, ruling, and reigning king who will one day return.

And this revelation, it was important to the church. It still is important to the church. But it was important to the church, especially the early church, because the church needed to be reminded and reassured that in the midst of opposition and in the midst of all the obstacles that they faced to the gospel, they were to remain focused.

[6 : 59] They were to remain faithful. They were to remain fixed upon Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone. They were, as we've said many times before, they were to stop looking inwards and start looking upwards.

They were to lift their eyes heavenwards so that they live their lives with an eternal perspective, seeing what is beyond the veil of this world. And that's what's been gradually and gloriously revealed to us in this revelation.

Because after revealing Jesus Christ as the risen, ruling, and reigning king who's going to return, we saw that in chapter 1, after reading then through all these letters to the seven churches in Asia in chapters 2 and 3, then in chapter 4, John told us that that God the Father is seated upon the throne of heaven and that around this great throne, there are 24 elders, there are four living creatures, and night and day, they are worshipping.

They are singing and saying, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come. And as we've continued in this revelation, into chapter 5, John says that he saw in the right hand of him, seated on the throne, a scroll, a sovereign scroll, containing a complete and comprehensive plan of God's eternal decrees for this world.

And it was being held in the powerful right hand of the one who is sovereign, superior, and supreme over all things. But this sovereign scroll, we're told it had seven seals.

[8 : 38] And it was seven seals because seven is the number of perfection. Therefore, the one worthy to open the seven seals and to open the scroll is only one who is perfect.

Which led to an angel asking the question, who is worthy? Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals? And as we read through chapter 5, John wept, and those around the throne, they worshipped because Jesus is revealed as the sinless and spotless Lamb of God.

Heaven rejoiced in this revelation as it sang this new song to the Lord. And all around the throne, there was this picture of praise with the 24 elders and the four living creatures and the thousands and thousands, the myriads and myriads of angels singing, worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.

And this revelation, it continues to be revealed as we go into chapter 6. And in the first half of chapter 6, we saw the first four seals being opened.

And as these first four seals on this sovereign scroll were opened, they revealed the four horsemen of the apocalypse. And if you remember the painting we had on the screen, the four horsemen of the apocalypse, they were not this scene of terror but a scene of triumph.

[10 : 08] Because Jesus, the King of Kings, he was riding the white horse. He's out front and he's leading the red horse of persecution. He's leading the black horse of poverty and the pale horse of

death.

King Jesus was leading them and he's using them all for his own glory because they're the means by which the gospel will continue to gallop and sinners will come to salvation.

They're the means by which Jesus Christ is building his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And so the message of John right up until this point or the message of Jesus to John right up until this point is John, look up.

Look up. Stop looking inward. Start looking upward. Look upward to the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne. And you know, that's the message of each and every one of these seven seals.

Stop looking inward. Start looking upward. And we see that even when we come to the fifth and also to the sixth seal. Because the fifth seal, as we said, it sets before us God's justice.

[11:20] And the sixth seal sets before us God's judgment. And as Psalm 89 says, justice and judgment of thy throne are made the dwelling place.

Justice and judgment of thy throne are made the dwelling place. And that's the image John sees in his revelation because he writes in verse 9, when Jesus 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.

Now, this is the first time in the book of Revelation that we're told that there's an altar in heaven.

There's an altar in heaven. And as this revelation is gradually revealed more and more to us, as you go through the book of Revelation you see that this altar is mentioned again and again.

And the altar in heaven we're told later on in the book, I think it's chapter 8, we're told that it's a golden altar and it's right before the throne of God and it's upon that altar that incense is offered.

And the incense is offered along with the prayers of all the saints. And you know, the image is so helpful and it makes sense because as we've seen so far in this revelation, heaven is being depicted to us, heaven is being described to us as a place of worship.

[12:50] It's a place of worship where God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are being worshipped. They're being worshipped as the triumphant and triune God of heaven.

And so when the fifth seal is opened, John sees God's justice being done before the throne of God because judgment, justice and judgment, says Psalm 89, justice and judgment of thy throne are made the dwelling place.

My friend, John sees God's justice towards those, as we read there in verse 9, towards those who have been persecuted and killed for Christ's sake.

John sees, as we read, the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. You know, the Puritan Matthew Henry, he makes this beautiful comment in his commentary.

I'm sure many of us have his commentary on the whole Bible. But he says that the martyrs who had been persecuted and killed for their faithful witness to the word of God and to Jesus Christ, he says, they are at the foot of the altar of incense in the most holy place of heaven, right at the feet of Jesus.

[14:09] And Matthew Henry writes, he says, holy martyrs are very near to Christ in heaven. They have the highest place there. It is not their own death, he says, but the sacrifice of Christ that gives them a reception into heaven and a reward there.

they do not wash their robes in their own blood, but in the blood of the Lamb. And what's amazing is that verse 10 there, even though they cry out, O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth, even though they cry that out, the suffering saints in glory, they know that the one seated on the throne, he will provide justice.

for the sin of persecution. He will provide justice for the sin of persecution. They know that in the end there will be victory and there will be vindication for all the suffering saints.

And you know, is that not why Jesus said, do you remember Jesus said, he said it to the Pharisees, do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul, rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

And you know, to read this revelation when the fifth seal was opened, to have read this as a member in the early church, it would have been such an encouragement to them, such an encouragement to the early church because they were encountering and experiencing such severe persecution from the Roman Empire.

[15:52] But you know, it would have also been such an encouragement for the Apostle John to witness it first hand, to see this seal being opened and to hear what's been said because John,

remember, he's the only apostle still living.

He's the only one left. He's the last man standing. All the other apostles who had been called and commissioned and commanded with Jesus right at the beginning, they're all dead. They've all been executed for following Jesus and here's John, all on his own, exiled in Patmos.

And John knows that living under the authority and aggression of the Roman Empire, it meant that you were signing your death warrant when you were making your confession, Jesus ha Curios, Jesus is Lord.

And we know that they were put to death. We've mentioned this before. Peter, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Simon the Zealot, they were all crucified. James was beheaded.

Matthew was killed with an axe. Thomas was thrust through with a spear. James, the son of Alphaeus, stoned to death. Matthias, the new addition to the apostles, he was beheaded.

[17:02] They were all put to death, as it says there in verse 9, for their faithful witness to the word of God and to Jesus Christ. And you know, you look at it and you think, well, the early church reading this, but not only the early church reading this, every century of church history reading this because martyrdom has been the story of church history.

Martyrdom has been the story of church history. It was Tertullian, the early church father, he said, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. And it was so true because when you follow the flow of church history, you read of so many men and so many women who were persecuted and put to death for their faithful witness to the word of God and to Jesus Christ.

From the very first martyr, from Stephen, stoned to death, then there was Paul, the persecutor come preacher of the gospel. You go into the early church, there's men like Polycarp and there's men like Justin Martyr, Cyprian, they're all persecuted.

There was John Huss in the medieval church. He was burned at the stake and yet his death was an influence upon Martin Luther who, as you know, paved the way for the Reformation.

There was John Wycliffe, there was William Tyndale, martyred for translating the Bible into English. There was Patrick Hamilton and George Wishart.

[18:34] They were burned at the stake in St Andrews. There were Scottish Reformed martyrs. There was Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, Thomas Cranmer, the Oxford martyrs.

There was the two Margarets. You remember Margaret MacLachlan and Margaret Wilson, the Solway Sisters who were put to death during the killing times of the Covenanters in the 17th century.

In fact, my sister-in-law, she went to visit the site when she was on holiday. She went to see the memorial to the two Margarets beside the Solway Firth. My friend, many men and many women were persecuted and put to death for, as it says there, for their faithful witness to the Word of God and to Jesus Christ.

And you know, the opening of this seal would have been the greatest comfort to them, the greatest consolation to know that the Lord will bring justice for the sin of persecution.

And you know, you read this and then you look at the world around us. The world around us will tell us that as the years pass, as the centuries go on, as human beings, we are improving.

[19:47] We're improving all the time, they'll say. We're more intelligent now. But the church will say, as the years pass, we're not more intelligent as human beings.

We're more intolerant as human beings. And I say that because the number of Christians being persecuted and put to death for their faithfulness to the Word of God and their witness to Jesus Christ, it is rising year on year.

And it's often said that more Christians have been martyred for their faith in the past century than in the previous 19 centuries combined.

The charity, I'm sure we've mentioned it before, the charity Open Doors. It states that the number of Christians killed for their faith in 2022 was 5,898.

That's a massive rise from the year before, which was 4,761. And you know, you read these, they're only numbers to us. But Jesus knows every one of them and they are all around that throne.

[20:59] They are all known to Him. They're all known and this seal to them was the greatest comfort as they faced death for their faith.

But not only those who died, there are many millions who are rejected, they're ridiculed, they're despised, they're discriminated for their faith in Jesus Christ. And much of it takes place in our own nation.

But our comfort, our consolation, as it is for the others, is that the fifth seal comes with this promise. The promise that the sin of persecution will be punished.

Every wrong will be righted. There will be victory and there will be vindication for all the suffering saints of Jesus. There will be victory and vindication for all the suffering saints of Jesus.

That's what we're told in verse 11. Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest, rest a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

[22 : 15] Victory and vindication will take place for all the suffering saints of Jesus. Justice and judgment of thy throne are made the dwelling place.

And so the fifth seal sets before us God's judgment, God's justice. But then the sixth seal sets before us God's judgment, which is what we see lastly and more briefly.

So God's justice and then God's judgment. Justice and judgment of thy throne are made the dwelling place. So look at verse 12. God's judgment.

We read there that when Jesus opened the sixth seal, John looked and behold there was a great earthquake and the sun became black as sackcloth. The full moon became like blood and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.

The sky vanished like a scroll that has been rolled up and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful and everyone slave and free they hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains calling to the mountains and rocks 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?

[23 : 47] Do you know when considering these verses it was Joel Beeky who asked he asked if evil triumphs and the world gets worse and the wicked prosper what is the point of being a Christian?

If evil triumphs and the world gets worse and the wicked prosper what's the point of being a Christian? Opening the sixth seal says Beeky answers that question it tells us that the day of judgment is coming when God and his almighty power will right every wrong with the world he will shake the world and everyone in it he will move mountains and islands darken the sun turn the moon to blood and cause the stars to fall from heaven it will be a terrifying day for those who are not right with God my friend breaking the sixth seal reveals the serious and even the solemn reality of the day of judgment where everything that we know we now know to be stable and secure in this life it will be removed and as it says there rolled up like a scroll it will all be just rolled up like a scroll and in that moment it will no longer be appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment because judgment will have arrived and on the day of judgment the Bible reminds us all must stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account all people everywhere in every generation throughout history all the kings and queens of the earth all the great men and women of history John is told here that the rich and the restless the political and the powerful the celebrities and the slaves the famous and even the free all the governments all the governors all the generals of the earth all must stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account we all must stand to give an account and it will be the judgment seat of Christ it will be his judgment seat and it will be his judgment seat because as Paul reminded the people in Athens in Acts 17 God has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has appointed and he has given assurance of this says Paul by raising him from the dead we know we are going to stand before the judgment seat of Christ because God raised him from the dead all must stand before King Jesus the risen ruling and reigning king who will return but instead of standing before this tremendous and terrifying judgment seat of Christ

Jesus says here as he said on the cross you'll remember he said it on the cross too he said on that day there will be many who will want to hide in caves and cry out for the rocks saying verse 16 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 then it says who can stand who can stand who can stand who or Psalm 130 who shall stand if thou Lord shouldst mark iniquity do you know my friend how awful it will be to be condemned by the one who came to save sinners to be condemned by the one who came to save sinners and the day of judgment is coming which should give to us as the Lord's people an urgency with this good news there is an urgency in it an urgency with the good news of the gospel because it ought to remind us the sixth seal ought to remind us that when this

risen ruling and reigning king when he finally returns he will judge us

Psalm 98 tells us he will judge the world in righteousness and his people faithfully he will judge the world in righteousness and his people faithfully justice will be done and judgment will be delivered all from the throne of God justice will be done and judgment delivered from the throne of God and so you see even in these two seals Psalm 89 is being fulfilled Psalm 89 is you could say coming to fruition as the fifth and sixth seal reveal that God's throne is a throne of justice a throne of justice for the Lord's people and a throne of judgment for those who are still outside of Christ justice and judgment of thy throne are made the dwelling place but may the Lord bless these thoughts to us let us pray O Lord our gracious

[29 : 22] God we give thanks to thee this evening for thy word and we thank thee Lord that it is a living word a word that spoke first to the early church who read it and a word that has spoken to thy people down throughout the centuries a seal that has encouraged them and reminded them that thou art the God who has a perfect plan and who is working out his plan and even though that plan may include persecution that thou art the God who will bring victory and vindication for his people Lord remember thy people even those who are persecuted this evening those who are hated without a cause persecuted for righteousness sake and yet even as Jesus taught us blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven and Lord as we are reminded also of thy judgment the great judgment day when all will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account

O Lord we pray that more and more in our homes and in our families that they would be clothed in the righteousness of Christ for that day that they would be washed in his blood that they would know him personally as their saviour that they would stand before him on that day and confess as all of the Lord's people will that my beloved is mine and I am his O Lord we plead that thou wouldst give to us an urgency as thy people that we would be willing to tell it to the generation following that this God is our God and that he will be our guide even unto death bless us Lord we pray bless thy truth we plead and help us we ask to stop looking inward and to start and keep looking upward to keep our eyes firmly fixed upon Jesus and know him and love him and keep following him as the author and the finisher of our faith cleanse us we pray go before us for Jesus sake

Amen we're going to bring our time to a conclusion this evening we're going to sing the words of Psalm 89 Psalm 89 page 345 in the Blue Psalm book Psalm 89 Scottish Psalter version singing from verse 13 down to the verse marked 16 Psalm 89 at verse 13 thou hast an arm that's full of power thy hand is great in might and thy right hand exceedingly exalted is in height justice and judgment of thy throne are made the dwelling place mercy accompanied with truth shall go before thy face oh greatly blessed the people are the joyful sound that know in brightness of thy face O Lord they ever on shall go they in thy name shall all the day rejoice exceedingly and in thy righteousness shall they exalted be on high so we'll sing these verses of Psalm 89 from verse 13 to 16 to God's praise thou hast an arm that's full of power thy hand is great in might and thy right hand exceedingly exalted is in height justice and judgment of thy throne are made the dwelling place mercy■

O greatly blessed the people are, the joyful song God knows.

In brightness of thy face, O Lord, they ever long shall go.

[34 : 31] They in thy name shall all the day rejoice exceedingly.

And in thy righteousness shall they exalted me on high.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.