

# The Sixth Seal

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*"I looked when He opened the sixth seal,  
and behold, there was a great earthquake;  
and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair,  
and the moon became like blood.  
And the stars of heaven fell to the earth,  
as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind.  
Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up  
and every mountain and island was moved out of its place.  
And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men,  
the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man,  
hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains,  
and said to the mountains and rocks,  
'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne  
and from the wrath of the Lamb!  
For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?'"  
(Revelation 6:12-17)*

Among astronomy buffs, mid-November of each year brings the potential for an exciting and spectacular display in the heavens, the famous Leonid Meteor Shower, which in recent years has far outdone summer's Perseid Shower for oohs and ahhs. During a typical meteor shower, a person can expect to see only five to ten falling stars per hour, even in a dark, country location. In 1966, however, stunned observers of the Leonid Shower estimated a peak rate of 100,000 meteors per hour, a rate rightly termed a "meteor storm." In contrast, Joe Rao, Night Sky Columnist at SPACE.com, writes in "Drizzle of Shooting Stars Expected Friday Morning" (November 12, 2004):

The Leonid meteors are debris shed into space by the Tempel-Tuttle comet, which swings through the inner solar system at intervals of 33 years. With each visit the comet leaves behind a trail of dust in its wake.

Lots of the comet's old dusty trails litter the mid-November part of Earth's orbit and the Earth glides through this debris zone every year. Occasionally we'll pass directly through an unusually concentrated dust trail, or filament, which can spark a meteor storm resulting in thousands of meteors per hour. That's what happened in 1999, 2001 and 2002.

Since the Tempel-Tuttle comet passed the Sun in 1998, it was in those years immediately following its passage that the Leonids put on their best show.

But now, the comet—and its dense trails of dust—have all receded far beyond Earth's orbit and back into the outer regions of the solar system. So odds are that there is little, if any chance of any unusual meteor activity.

Mankind has always been fascinated with the heavens: their beauties, their mysteries, their movements, and their surprises. Early on in man's history, after years of observation and record keeping, the learned discovered that—with certain exceptions—the movements of the heavenly bodies could be predicted, as could phenomena like eclipses, comets, and meteor showers. To them, what occurred on the dark canvas of space revealed creation's design, order, and perfection. As David wrote, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork" (Psalm 19: 1).

Despite the rational, scientific understanding of most celestial happenings, sudden changes in the normally placid, soothing nighttime sky can cause wonder and even panic. Comets, long thought to portend world-changing events, have been known to ignite terrors in superstitious people. Eclipses of the sun can spur the unenlightened to believe the end of the world has come, as can a "bloody" moon. From the earliest times, men and women perverted even the regular movements of heavenly bodies into astrology, and millions still consult their readings daily. God warns, "Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them" (Jeremiah 10:2).

Yet, God Himself uses heavenly phenomena as signs of momentous events. Perhaps the most famous is the "Star of Bethlehem," which guided the wise men to their audience with the young King of the Jews (Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11). Though this "star" was most likely an angel standing as a beacon for the magi to follow, many have postulated "natural" explanations such as comets and supernovae. The Ninth Plague on Egypt (Exodus 10:21-23), Joshua's Long Day (Joshua 10:12-14), Hezekiah's Sundial (II Kings 20:8-11), and the darkness during Jesus' crucifixion (Matthew 27:45) all involved aberrations of expected solar behavior. All signaled major movements in God's plan.

The sixth seal also involves heavenly bodies doing the unexpected: The sun darkens, the moon turns blood-red, the stars fall, and the sky itself rolls up like a scroll. Not only do these terrifying cosmic wonders signal the beginning of the Day of the Lord, but they, like the previous five seals, also serve as judgments against sinful mankind on planet Earth.

### **Earth Quakes, Heaven Shakes**

Unlike the other five seals, the text of the sixth seal is straightforward and uncomplicated. Only a few of the details in the description require more than a brief comment in explanation. Far more important to understanding this seal as a judgment is the effect the signs have on the people of the earth.

The seal opens with "a great earthquake" (Revelation 6:12), a common indicator of God appearing (see Judges 5:4; Psalm 68:8; 77:18; 97:4; Habakkuk 3:10; Haggai 2:6-7), working out His purpose (see Exodus 19:18; Matthew 27:51-54; 28:2; Acts 16:26), and/or striking out in displeasure and judgment. In terms of anger and punishment, God caused an earthquake to open the ground in the wilderness and swallow Korah and his fellow rebels (Numbers 16:31-32). In Psalm 18:7, David writes, "Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations of the hills also quaked and were shaken, because He was angry" (see Isaiah 5:25; Nahum 1:2-5). God prophesies in Isaiah 13:11, 13, "I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity. . . . Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth will move out of her place, in the wrath of the Lord of hosts, and in the day of His fierce anger."

Earthquakes occur frequently in Revelation, of which this one is the first. Seismic activity accompanies the seventh seal (Revelation 8:5), the resurrection of the Two Witnesses (11:13), the seventh trumpet (11:19), and the seventh bowl or vial (KJV) of God's wrath (16:18). Evidently, massive earthquakes—the kind that strikes dread and panic into every soul caught in them—will frequently punctuate the Day of the Lord.

Certainly, the heavenly signs that occur in tandem with the great temblor are astounding, especially if all of them should occur within a short span of time. Joel 2:30-31 describes the same event: "And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord." In the Olivet Prophecy, Jesus repeats the warning: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (Matthew 24:29; Mark 13:24-25). Luke's rendition adds a few details:

And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken. (Luke 21:25-26)

*The Sun Darkened:* John describes the darkness of the sun as "black as sackcloth of hair" (Revelation 6:12), comparing it to the black goat hair used to make sackcloth and tents in his day. This may depict a solar eclipse or possibly a massive dust storm caused by a volcanic explosion. The Ninth Plague covered Egypt with a "darkness which may even be felt," a "thick darkness" (Exodus 10:21-22), and perhaps God will repeat it on an even grander scale. Whatever the case, visibility will be severely limited, even during the daylight hours.

*The Moon Like Blood:* This chilling sight presages calamity and death, particularly in war, as in the color of the second horse (Revelation 6:4). Sometimes lunar discoloration occurs naturally when unusual amounts of dust are suspended in the atmosphere, particularly after a volcanic eruption or an earthquake. Incidentally, many manuscripts read "full moon" rather than simply "moon."

*The Stars Fall:* John's imagery reflects countless late figs blown down by the violent winter wind (verse 13). This seems most likely to predict a meteor shower of immense proportions, possibly containing larger-than-normal meteorites, thus increasing the effect and making it seem as if the stars themselves are falling. Because stars are a biblical symbol of angels, some have suggested that this verse parallels Revelation 12:7-10, the casting out of Satan and his demons from heaven. However, for this to have any credence, the concurrent celestial events must also be taken symbolically.

*The Sky Recedes:* Of these four wonders, this event is the most puzzling (Revelation 6:14). The apostle compares it to a scroll rolling up, or we might think of it in terms of opening a spring-loaded window blind. Joseph A. Seiss, in his *The Apocalypse: Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, comments: "Great, massive, rotary motion in the whole visible expanse, is signified, as if it were folding itself up to pass away forever." Perhaps John saw clouds building to thunderheads, roiling, and flying at breakneck speed across the expanse of the sky. Such turbulence could make an observer on the ground think the sky was splitting apart. Isaiah 34:4 describes the day of the Lord similarly.

*The Mountains and Islands Move:* As a result of the great convulsion of the earth, massive land transformations occur, shifting mountains on land and undersea. Obviously, such a violent shaking will create unprecedented destruction and loss of life. As the conclusion of the sixth seal's disturbances, this displacement of *terra firma* is the calamity that most terrifies earth's inhabitants. Suddenly, nothing is stable—not even the earth under their feet!

Finally, God has their attention!

### **"Fall on Us!"**

The effect of these cosmic signs from God is to produce terror in earth's populace, triggering humanity's strong drive to preserve itself. Despite mountains moving, men and women of every origin, status, and creed—from king to slave—flee for the caves under the mountains in a vain attempt to hide themselves from God (Revelation 6:15). This is reminiscent of Isaiah 2:19, a prophecy of the Day of the Lord: "They shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, from the terror of the Lord and the glory of His majesty, when He arises to shake the earth mightily."

John sees these fearful people speaking to the mountains and rocks, commanding them to hide them from the sight of God the Father and from the "wrath of the Lamb" (verse 16). Their cry, "Fall on us!" is not a death wish or a suicidal means to avoid God's judgment but a hope that the mountains will cover and conceal them. "Fall on us and hide us" is typical Hebrew parallelism, as can be seen from an Old Testament parallel in which Israelites "shall say to the mountains, 'Cover us!' and to the hills, 'Fall on us!'" (Hosea 10:8).

It is somewhat startling that earth's sinners correctly identify these catastrophic events as evidences of God's wrath. We are used to them being termed "natural disasters" and in no way a result of God's intervention in humanity's affairs. Yet, this time, these cataclysmic signs are indeed "acts of God," and men know it. Such a succession of disturbances can be nothing other than divine anger.

Further, people seek to be "out of sight, out of mind" to both the Father—"Him who sits on the throne" (Revelation 6:16)—and the Lamb, Jesus Christ. Often, the phrase "face of Him," "face of God," or "face of the Lord" suggests being in His presence (Genesis 33:10; I Samuel 26:20; II Chronicles 7:14; Lamentations 2:19; Luke 1:76). However, it can also imply being under the judgment of an angry God (see Leviticus 26:17; Psalm 34:16; Jeremiah 44:11; Lamentations 4:16; also Amos 9:4). Obviously, the latter idea fits this instance.

Initially, it seems incongruous to pair "wrath" with "of the Lamb," but it makes perfect sense on two levels. First, "Lamb" is only one title of this complex Individual, Jesus Christ, who is not a cute, cuddly, little lamb. As the Johnny Cash song, "A Boy Named Sue," relates, a person's name cannot describe his entire personality, and one may rue the day he made the assumption it could! The same Jesus Christ who took little children in His arms and blessed them also made a whip of cords and angrily drove the moneychangers from God's Temple.

Second, as it pertains to Christ, the lamb represents a sacrificial Redeemer, One who gave His life to buy back others who had been enslaved. The meaning of the symbol contemplates, not only the force

of character it would take to perform such a selfless act, but also the position of mastery to which it elevated Him due to its success. In other words, the imagery of the lamb contains both the Suffering Servant and the Exalted Lord and Judge of all (John 5:22).

### **"Who Is Able To Stand?"**

Revelation 6:17 should read, "For the day, the great [day] of Their wrath, has come, and who is able to stand?" This is a plain statement of truth followed by a rhetorical question (see Nahum 1:6; Malachi 3:2). The sixth seal announces in unmistakable fashion that "the great day of the Lord is near; it is near and hastens quickly" (Zephaniah 1:14). The prophet Joel describes it:

Blow the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain! Let all of the inhabitants of the land tremble; for the day of the Lord is coming, for it is at hand: A day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, like the morning clouds spread over the mountains. . . . The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble; the sun and moon grow dark, and the stars diminish their brightness. The Lord gives voice before His army, for His camp is very great; for strong is the One who executes His word. For the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; who can endure it? (Joel 2:1-2, 10-11)

This is the question: Who will survive it? Who will pass God's judgment? The answer seems to be, "No one." But there is hope, as Joel 2:12-14 instructs:

"Now, therefore," says the Lord, "turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him . . . ?

Jesus gives us His answer in Luke 21:36: "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man." We must be alert and prepared for what may come, and the most important part of our preparation is the strengthening of our relationships with the Father and the Son through prayer, study, meditation, and obedience to His instructions. This is the only means to escape God's wrath.

Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation, before the decree is issued, or the day passes like chaff, before the Lord's fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's anger comes upon you! Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger. (Zephaniah 2:1-3)

If we wish to avoid the coming stern and destructive judgment of God on recalcitrant mankind, there is no time like the present to seek His face (Psalm 105:4).