

Revelation Ch. 6: The First Six Seals

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Here the stage is set for the rest of the book, discussing the storm that has been brewing since the death of Jesus, the tribulation that is about to take place, and the pronouncement of the coming judgment on Jerusalem.

The Four Horsemen

Horses often symbolize war (9:7, 9), and so the following symbols of the four horsemen signify the terrible things that take place in time of war. Jesus described wars and rumors of wars as just the beginning of sorrows (Matt. 24:6-8) leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem. We know from history that this was a very troubled time, “horrible even in peace” (Tacitus, *The Histories* 1.2), which Jesus describes as “great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matt. 24:21).

The book of Zechariah speaks of horsemen, described as spirits that God has sent to walk to and fro throughout the earth (Zech. 1:10; 6:5). We see the same idea in Revelation, in that these horsemen are portrayed as angels sent to do God's will (7:1-3; 9:15). Notice also that these horsemen, instruments of God's wrath, are held back until the faithful are sealed (7:1-3). The calamities are here only announced, and stored up until the appointed time (9:14, 15; cf. 6:9-11).

Verse 1

Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals; and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, “Come and see.”

The voice like thunder was a loud call to attention and symbolizes God's power to bring these things forth. Some translations have the voice simply say “Come,” while others “Come and see.” The voice was either calling the horseman to come forth, or calling John's attention to the vision. The former makes the most sense since it seems clear that John is watching.

Verse 2

And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

White is a symbol of victory, as was the crown (3:5; 2:10). Some think that this refers to Jesus conquering the world through the gospel and ultimate victory over His adversaries (cf. 19:11-16; Jn. 16:33; Rom. 8:37; 2 Cor. 10:5). This seems unlikely though since this horseman, along with the others, is held back from harming the earth (7:2; 9:15).

It likely refers to the conquering Roman army. Not only had they conquered most of the then known world, but were continuing to acquire new territories. They would soon fully conquer the region of Palestine and crush Jerusalem. The bow was often used when describing a conquering nation (Isa. 5:28; 7:24; Jer. 6:22-23; Lam. 2:4; 3:12).

Verses 3-4

When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, “Come and see.” Another horse, fiery red, went out. And it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that people should kill one another; and there was given to him a great

sword.

Red is a symbol of bloodshed. Jesus told of wars and rumors of wars, and nation rising against nation that would precede the tribulation period (Matt. 24:6-8; Tacitus, *The Histories* 1.2). The great sword symbolizes the mighty Roman army, the most powerful force in the world at that time. This is how Rome conquered the world, and this is how they would end the Jewish revolt.

Verses 5-6

When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come and see.” So I looked, and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine.”

Black is a color of gloom, distress, and emptiness. It is here a symbol of famine (cf. Lam. 5:10). The scales indicate a small supply of food (Ezek. 4:16). A denarius was a day's wages (cf. Matt. 20:2; Ogden, p. 198), and so the price here for wheat and barley was extremely high (perhaps eight to sixteen times higher than normal, Roper, p. 250). Josephus talks in great detail about the famine in Judea (Wars 5.10; 5.13.7; 6.3.3).

These statements seem to be directed at the horseman, and so the significance of not harming the oil and wine may be that these items would be available until the end of the daily sacrifices (Ex. 29:40; cf. Dan. 9:27; 12:11; cf. Josephus, Wars 5.13.6; 6.2.1).

Verses 7-8

When He opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, “Come and see.” So I looked, and behold, a pale horse. And the name of him who sat on it was Death, and Hades followed with him. And power was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth.

This horse was pale or ashen, meaning sickly pale, a symbol of sickness and death. Here we have the war and famine compounded with further death, likely by disease. Death and Hades have already been discussed (1:18), in that death claims the body and Hades the spirit. They are always grouped together (Rev. 20:13, 14; 1 Cor. 15:55).

Only part of the earth would be affected by these particular calamities, which likely refer to the atrocities in Palestine. These agents of death are mentioned by Ezekiel in connection with the first fall of Jerusalem (Ezek. 14:21).

Verses 9-10

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 testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

The fact that the souls were under the altar indicates sacrifice (cf. Lev. 4:18; Ex. 29:12; Lev. 4:7, 30). The testimony that they held was the message of Jesus (cf. 1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10). This, therefore, represents the faithful followers of God who had been slain from the beginning of the world. Now that Jesus had ascended to the throne (Ch. 5), these saints want to know when they will be avenged.

Since this question was posed at the time of His ascension, these souls represent those slain before the cross, and so would have to wait for the appointed time (9:15), until which others would be slain as

well (v. 11). While on earth, Jesus made it clear that the blood of all the righteous would be avenged on Jerusalem (Matt. 23:34, 35; Lk. 11:47-52; Rev. 18:24). They may not have literally cried out, but this symbolizes that God knows what needs to happen. Their blood was crying out (cf. Gen. 4:10), and He was listening (Lk. 21:22; Rev. 18:20).

Verse 11

Then a white robe was given to each of them;

White was reserved for those who had overcome (3:5; 7:9), and also represents righteousness (19:8). The Lamb had just prevailed (5:5), and so has ensured victory for all who have died faithfully, both before and after the cross.

and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.

These souls were in a place of rest (cf. Lk. 16:22). They were told that it would be a little while longer before they were avenged. Since this question was posed at Christ's ascension in 30 AD, then this verse makes sense in that there would be Christians persecuted until the time was fulfilled in 70 AD (cf. Matt. 24:9).

This time period was not so much as to wait for Christians to be martyred, as it was a time to allow the Jews to repent (2 Pet. 3:9), and also for them to "fill up the measure of their fathers' guilt" (Matt. 23:32; 1 Thes. 2:16). There would be a time when all Jews who were going to turn to Christ would do so (Rev. 7), and at that time would come vengeance (9:15).

Verses 12-13

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 figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind.

This seal was an announcement of the end. After the great tribulation, powers would be shaken, and the sun and moon would be darkened (Matt. 24:29; cf. Ezek. 38:19; Hag. 2:6; Amos 8:9; Joel 2:10; Isa. 13:10; Acts 2). Sackcloth was made of coarse animal hair, and was a symbol of mourning (Gen. 37:34) and penitence (Matt. 11:21). This period would be a time of bloodshed and mourning. The nation of Israel, as the chosen people of God, was about to have all the lights turned out (cf. Gen. 1:16).

The fallen stars probably refer to the rulers and leadership of Israel falling to Rome (cf. Dan. 8:10). The mighty wind of Rome would shake the Jews, stomping out the revolt as it marched toward Jerusalem. It was only a matter of time before the city was destroyed.

Verse 14

Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place.

Judgment has come! (Isa. 34:1-5) The book is about to be closed on the Jews (cf. Heb. 8:13). The mountains often represent the government or nation as a whole (8:8; Jer. 51:25). Islands might represent the individual (cf. Isa. 59:18). The picture is of a world in uproar.

Verse 15-17

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?”

Though men may try, you cannot hide from God! (Hos. 10:8; Lk. 23:28-30; cf. Gen. 3:8; Jonah 1:3) No one can bear His wrath (Hos. 10:8; Joel 2:11; Lk. 23:28-30; 1 Thes. 2:15-16; Heb. 10:31). Many mistakenly think that such a loving God would never punish anybody. Let it be a stern lesson that the seemingly harmless Lamb has executed, and will execute, judgment on the wicked.

The final judgment will be a great day of wrath, but also a great day of joy, depending on which side you are on (Matt. 25:46). The day spoken of here is a great day of wrath, which, in the context of the first century (1:1), can only be said of the destruction of Jerusalem (15:1, 7).

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