

The Lamb Opens the First Six Seals

Revelation 6

The vision of Revelation chapter 6 reveals the unfolding of seven seals. As we will discover in today's lesson these seven seals outline the history of God's church and Satan's opposition against it down through the centuries. The seventh seal climaxes with the return of Christ.

The First Seal—A White Horse

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." 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 (Revelation 6:1, 2).

Given how upset John was when no one could be found to open the seals (Revelation 5:4), I'm sure he was eager to see what was to take place when the first seal was opened. He saw a rider on a white horse. The rider was holding a bow and wore a crown. He was going forth to conquer. Throughout the New Testament, white is a symbol of apostolic purity, and a rider on a horse symbolizes conquest.

Remember, we have noted earlier that prophetic sequences in the Bible always begin in time at the place the prophet himself is. John is living in the first century after Jesus' return to heaven. The white horse galloping across the sky represents the apostolic church of the first century going forth to conquer the world for the gospel of Jesus. The church is like a horseman on a white horse, shooting the sharp arrows of God's Word into the hearts of pagans across the empire. Many of those who are hit by these arrows die to their old life of sin and come alive to a new life of grace and salvation in Jesus. The first seal symbolizes the powerful, pure apostolic faith that invaded marketplaces, homes, and even Caesar's household (Philippians 4:22). The white-horse period covered the years from approximately A.D. 31, the days of Jesus' ministry, on through the time of the apostles in the first century. One secular Roman writer complained, "You Christians are everywhere—in our armies, in our navies, in our universities, in our marketplaces; there

is no place we can go that you are not there.” “Believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” (Acts 5:14).

The gospel was so powerful in the first century it went under the unction of the Holy Spirit to all the then-known world. The devil was furious at the rapid spread of the gospel.

The Second Seal—A Red Horse

When He [the Lamb] 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 (Revelation 6:4).

The fiery red horse symbolizes the period of fiery persecution Satan unleashed on the church to stop its growth. A rider with a sword takes peace from the earth. Christians were thrown to the lions; they were burned at the stake; they were massacred with the sword. Yet they died praising God. The blood-stained faith carried the banner of truth high. The red-horse period of persecution extended from around A.D. 100 to 313.

The Third Seal—A Black Horse

Though it was a terrible time for the Christian church the devil’s persecutions under the second seal failed to destroy the church or keep it from growing. Satan turned to a different tactic. John says,

When He [the Lamb] 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” (verses 5, 6).

The black horse period represents a falling away from the truth. It represents the church's compromise with paganism that brought false doctrines into the church. Scales represent judgment. Daniel told Belshazzar, "You have been weighed in the balances and are found wanting" (Daniel 5:27). The church is judged in this black-horse period and found to be lacking in faithfulness. In this period (A.D. 313-538) Satan tried to destroy the church's effectiveness through compromise with the world. The apostle Paul warned the church in his day of this very thing.

I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also, from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves (Acts 20:29, 30).

The savage-wolf period was the period of Roman persecution during the blood-stained time under the red horse. But Paul warns that in the period of the black horse individuals would arise from within the church itself, "speaking perverse things." They would be teaching doctrines not in harmony with the Word of God, but in harmony with the world and its pagan religions.

Large church edifices took the place of the simplicity of God's Word. The outward ornaments of religion were substituted for the inner power of the gospel. Unconverted persons were baptized and brought into the church. When these "converted" pagans were brought into the Christian church, in an attempt to make them feel comfortable, the church renamed their gods after Christian saints and introduced their images into Christian worship. The pagans were used to worshipping the sun god on the day named for him. So, the church brought Sunday into Christianity as the day of worship in honor of Christ's resurrection. Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ was replaced by salvation through the sacraments of the church. The simple faith of the Bible was replaced by the elaborate pomp and complex ritual of the church.

As the third seal is opened, John hears a voice 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" (Revelation 6:6). These prices are about twelve times higher than the normal price for

wheat and barley in John's Day. This passage describes a time of scarcity of biblical truth. There was a scarcity of genuine faith. "Do not harm the oil and the wine," urges the voice John heard. We can understand this as a plea to preserve the apostolic gospel which was being threatened by the compromise taking place in the church.

Let's summarize what we have learned about the seals so far. Under the first seal, the white horse, the church is powerful in its apostolic purity. It goes out to conquer, witnessing to the world and winning men and women to Christ. During the time of the second seal, the red horse, Satan unleashes severe, bloody persecution against the church. But it continues to grow. Under the third seal, the black horse, Satan brings pagans and compromise into the church to water down the Christian faith. Images come in. Earthly priests come in. Sunday comes in and replaces God's seventh-day Sabbath. God's truth becomes scarce.

The Fourth Seal—A Pale Horse

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 the sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth (verses 7, 8).

This pale horse is the color of nausea and death. The Greek word translated, "pale," means a greenish-yellow color. The color of this pale horse reminded John of the sickly, greenish-gray color of a corpse with decaying flesh. The rider sitting on this gruesome animal is named "Death." None of the horsemen in the previous seals had been given a name. "Hades" rides with Death. Hades refers to hell or the grave.

The church that should have been pointing the way to eternal life, was instead spreading spiritual disease and death. During the time of the fourth seal, in the Middle or Dark Ages, the Bible was forbidden to ordinary Christians, most of whom couldn't read, anyway—certainly not Latin, and the Bible was not available in the common languages.

Nobles and commoners alike were ignorant of the Scriptures and the great truths they contain. The church had united with the political power to exercise both secular and spiritual authority.

John says that the riders on pale this horse were given power to kill by the sword, hunger, death, and wild beasts. Those who did not go along with the authority of the church were persecuted, and thousands were killed. Describing this period, secular historian, James Wearing, makes this amazing statement: “Christianity became an established religion in the Roman Empire and took the place of paganism. Christianity as it existed in the dark ages might be termed baptized paganism” (*Church History*, Century 2, chapter 2, section 7).

These centuries are called the Dark Ages for good reason. The darkness of biblical ignorance and apostasy descended on the church. The persecution of anyone who resisted the church’s authority or questioned its doctrines cast darkness across the religious landscape.

Fifth Seal—The Cry of the Martyrs

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 upon the earth?” Then a white robe was given to each of them; 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 (Revelation 6:9-11).

What is the altar and who are the souls under the altar? Is there really an altar in heaven with the souls of those faithful ones who have died for the Lord crying out beneath it for vengeance?

The descriptions of these seals are highly symbolic. The entire vision of the four horsemen galloping across the sky is symbolic. This scene is also symbolic.

Think about it, if the souls of the martyrs really are in heaven, under an altar, crying out for their death to be avenged—that’s a rather grim picture of what their existence in heaven is like!

What does it mean their “souls” are crying out? In the Bible, a “soul” often refers, not to some immortal entity within us that leaves the body at death, but to a living person. Genesis 2:7 (KJV) says, "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." The NKJV says, “. . . and man became a living being.” The Bible does not say that God put a soul into man at creation; it says that He created a living being. The souls under the altar are those who were martyred here on earth. They are in their graves, but their voices still symbolically cry out for God's justice to be done. It is not that they are literally under the altar crying out. This is symbolic language like when God told Cain, “The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10).

When this fifth seal is opened, we see all those who were persecuted down through the ages. It’s drawing near the time for God’s judgment to sit. It’s coming time for accounts to be settled and their deaths to be avenged. God’s judgment hour is about to strike on the celestial clock.

The fifth seal covers the period from the 1790s to 1844 when God begins to answer the cry of the martyrs to avenge their blood. The cry of the martyrs in the fifth seal is their cry that Jesus will come, and they will be resurrected from their graves and that righteousness will reign throughout the universe for all eternity.

But the end is not quite yet. The end is near, but there is a little time yet to pass before the judgment is completed and Jesus returns.

The Sixth Seal—Cosmic Disturbances on Earth and in the Heavens

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 (verses 12, 13).

At the opening of the judgment, just before the court sits in heaven, just before the destinies of all humanity is settled, God says He is going to set out some signs so that we can know where we are in the stream of time. And these four signs have to come in that order. These signs would prepare a generation for the judgment hour that is coming. God's judgment hour would take place in heaven over a period of time before Jesus returns

. At the end of the fifth seal and the beginning of the sixth, a great earthquake struck Europe with its center in Lisbon, Portugal on November 1, 1755. It was one of the largest and most deadly earthquakes ever to hit this world. It shook most of Europe as far north as Finland and as far south as northern Africa. Some sources say shocks were felt in Greenland and the Caribbean. Deaths in Lisbon alone were estimated to be as high as 100,000. As terrible as this earthquake was, we might not see it as that significant prophetically unless it were followed by the other signs under the sixth seal. Was the sun darkened following the earthquake?

On May 19, 1780, some twenty-five years after the earthquake, people all up and down the east coast of North America woke up to a new morning. For some the daylight seemed normal. In other areas the sun seemed unnaturally hazy and obscured. Around 10:00 or 11:00 o'clock an extraordinary darkness took place. The sun turned dark. Chickens went to roost and tree frogs began peeping as if night had fallen. Darkness covered the land, and it remained dark until that evening.

The *Boston Gazette*, May 29, 1780, reported on this unusual event, saying, "There was the appearance of midnight at noonday. . . . Perhaps it was never darker since the children of Israel left the house of bondage." That evening the moon rose red in color like blood. Milo Bostick, writing in Stone's *History of Massachusetts*, says, "The moon, which was at its full, had the appearance of blood."

What about the stars falling from the sky like ripe figs from a tree? The *American Journal of Science and Arts*, 1834, contained this account:

The morning of November 13, 1833 was rendered memorable by the exhibition of the phenomena called shooting stars which was probably more extensive and magnificent than any similar one hitherto recorded.

Probably no celestial phenomena has ever occurred in this country since its first settlement which was viewed with so much admiration and delight by one class of spectators or with so much astonishment and fear by another class. For nearly four hours the sky was literally ablaze. More than a billion shooting stars appeared over the United States and Canada alone.

What were these heavenly signs for? They were signals for the generation then living that the next phase in God's plan for earth would be the dawning of the judgment hour, followed by the return of Jesus. The sixth seal closes with a dramatic picture of the Second Coming and the effect this event would have on those who were not ready.

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 6:14-17).

Is there a more heartrending picture given anywhere else in the Bible? Those who are not ready to meet Jesus when He returns would rather be crushed to death by the rocks and mountains than to look on His face! He wanted to save them. He called to them throughout their lives, but they refused to listen. Now they hide in terror. Christ has done everything possible to save them, but they spurned His mercy, rejected His love and turned their backs on His invitation for salvation.

Revelation 6 ends with the question: Who shall be able to stand? Who is going to be able to stand in the judgment? Revelation 7 will answer that question. Chapter 7 is a parenthesis placed between the sixth and the seventh seal. The seventh seal is not opened until chapter 8, because John pauses in chapter 7 to answer the question: Who shall be able to stand?