

Breaking the Seals

Revelation 6:1-17

By [Derek Thomas](#)

I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come!"

2 I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

10 They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed

from its place.

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the 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 their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

Just as chapters 4 and 5 belonged together, so in some senses at least, do chapters 6 and 7. Chapter 5:1 introduced us to a scroll (or "book") sealed with seven seals. Chapter 6 now relates the opening of the first six of these seals (the seventh is opened at 8:1).

We may already be asking, What is this scroll? One way to answer that is to allow the seals to be opened and let the text tell us what is inside. And what is that? Trouble and more trouble! But it's not as simple as that. In some sense at least, we do not need Jesus to tell us that the world is going to be full of troubles. What we need, and what we find, is an interpretation of trouble. Providence, however dark, is always purposive. Revelation 6 provides for us a way to look at the troubles of this world and give them an explanation from a Christian and theocentric, or God-centered, point of view.

For John's readers, the Christian life was costly. For some it involved imprisonment, for others, death. Jesus, so it seemed, had not taken all their troubles away. Ownership of Jesus' name seemed to involve a costliness that was beyond the ability of many to understand. Faith itself was under attack as the cost of discipleship rose. The Book of Revelation is a glimpse of the future in order to steel the nerves of the faithful. But it also a glimpse of the present (their present) in order to reassure the faithful that God had not abandoned them. If Christ is establishing His kingdom as chapter 5 has suggested, then why is it that so many Christians are being put to death? This was an intensely personal issue for the church in John's day, and it remains problematic for Christians today in many parts of the world. The Book of Revelation is giving us an answer that is designed to give us the greatest confidence in the unfolding providence of God. John's method has prepared us for the worst. After examining chapter 6 we will be all the more grateful for chapters 4 and 5. Only to the extent that we know Christ's rule shall we appreciate how he conquers every foe.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

There is no real break following the end of chapter 5. John had seen and heard the worship of heaven. Then, "I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals" (6:1). It is not as though the worship has ended and something else has begun. The Lamb is reigning in heaven and at the same time there is chaos and disorder on earth. The Lamb is being presented to John as the interpreter of history, as the Lord over chaos and evil.

A seven point sermon follows, as each seal, in turn, is unlocked. The first four seals are broken to reveal four horses. Strange? Of course! But only because we no longer associate horses with war as John readers no doubt did (cf. [Job 39:25](#); [Psa. 76:6](#); [Prov. 21:31](#); [Ezek. 26:10](#)). What these un-sealings prepare us for is warfare. Tribulation is part of the believer's lot.

The problem of evil is a problem for the atheist! For the believer, evil is going to be conquered; it has, in one sense, been conquered in Christ's death and resurrection, and what we now see of evil's machinations are the death throes of a defeated enemy who cannot bring himself to believe that it is all over.

The first unsealing gives us a glimpse of a man riding a white horse (6:2). Who is this rider on a white horse? Commentators, it has to be said, have been sharply divided: some suggesting that is Christ and others suggesting it is antichrist!

It is not difficult to see why some have thought this white horseman to be Christ. A comparison with [Revelation 19:11-16](#) alone will suffice. In that case, we are being given a vivid picture of how Jesus makes sense of history in a fallen world. He is working out His Father's purpose, so that one day He may present Him with a kingdom (cf. [1 Cor. 15:24](#)). This may explain why Psalm 110 was popular in the early church, and remains so today:

The LORD says to my Lord:

"Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."

The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion;

You will rule in the midst of your enemies...

The LORD is at your right hand;

he will crush kings on the day of his wrath.

He will judge nations, heaping up the dead and crushing the rulers of the whole earth...

([Psa. 110:1-2, 5-6](#)).

The Jesus who died at Calvary is a glorious, powerful Conqueror!

However, it is difficult to follow the imagery whereby Christ opens the seal which contains a revelation of Himself. Other considerations will lead to the conclusion that the white horse and its rider belongs, in fact, to the same grouping as the other three: together they form a quarter of evil malevolence aimed against the world. Satan often mimics Christ. What we have here is a parody! The figure riding forth conquering and to conquer is not Christ, but Christ's enemy!

The next three unsealings provide us with glimpses of war, the red horse of war (6:4), the black horse of famine (6:5-6), and the pale horse of death and Hades (6:8). This evil quartet wreak havoc in every sphere of human life: social, ecological and biological. Wherever Adam's fall has penetrated, death's sting has reached. There is no escaping its clutches. History, no matter what century, is a story of assaults on life, land, and body. History, from John's time until now, has been about war, famine and death. The

century that has just past gave fullest expression to it as the bloodiest in the history of mankind. John's prophecy is fulfilled before our very eyes.

On some imaginary stage, all four riders are called to battle, "Come!" (6:1,3,5,7). Jesus is calling the evil horseman to wage war! How can this be? It is the same problem that emerges when Satan harasses Job. He does so at the suggestion of God Himself (1:8; 2:3). God's sovereignty means that, in an ultimate sense, nothing happens outside of his will or decree. Nothing! And yet, theologians have always been eager to add that God is not the author of sin. Sin is under his control, and here the mayhem that these horsemen and their riders exert is under his control, too. They cannot move a muscle without the permission of God.

What the four horsemen of the apocalypse reveal is that which Jesus had predicted in the Olivet Discourse: "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains" ([Mark 13:7-8](#)). In the background is a similar depiction given by Zechariah: "During the night I had a vision-- and there before me was a man riding a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in a ravine. Behind him were red, brown and white horses" ([Zech 1:8](#)).

Martyred Souls in Heaven

There is a narrower dimension of evil in the unsealing of the fifth seal (6:9-11). This is a depiction of religious persecution in its most vicious form. John sees the "souls" of martyred saints before the throne of God. His first readers would have understood this well. They, after all, had lost loved ones to successive waves of Roman persecution and were about to experience some of its fiercest expressions.

The word "soul" here signifies that part of our existence which survives the death of the body (for a similar use of the word, see [Matt 10:28](#)). This, in a macabre sort of way, must have been encouraging to John's readers. Those who died so brutally were in heaven! The vision will return again towards the close of the Book of Revelation. In chapter 20, in the notoriously problematic passage which refers to the "thousand years" and which has given rise to various millenarian views, John sees "the souls of those who had been beheaded" (20:4; c.f. "slain" in 6:9). In chapter 20, the souls, as here are conscious and capable of being addressed and come to life for a thousand years. We shall see later that this refers to the time interval between the two advents of Christ. They live and reign with Christ waiting for the final resurrection of the body.

Although the souls are said to be before the throne of God, their specific location is described as "under the altar" (6:9). The altar was where sacrificial blood was poured under the Old Covenant administration and where "life" resulted for the offending party ([Lev 17:11](#)). The souls John sees have life, but only because atonement by blood shedding has been provided for them.

It is difficult to imagine anything of greater help to John's readers than to know that loved ones and friends who had been cruelly killed for their testimony to Christ are now alive and with Christ. To the question, Why does God allow such terrible things to happen to God's people? comes a two-fold reply. First, they are given white robes a symbol of victory. Second, they are told to rest for a while until the number of their fellow servants who are killed is complete (6:11). Suffering is to be understood as something that happens in this world. It only lasts until the course of this world is "complete." This provides for us the basic eschatological thrust of the New Testament view of life: we live in expectation of the end when God shall wrap everything up. It is a reminder that he is in control of history. Until then, they are to wait "a little longer" (6:11).

But it is their cry that proves interesting, and it will prove so throughout the rest of the book of Revelation. Their cry is haunting: "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" ([Rev 6:10](#)). Christians who do not appreciate the role justice plays in the works of God, who think that all Christians do is forgive, find themselves puzzled by this cry. But it is not at all puzzling. It is simply the cry of those who long that the justice of God (as well as His mercy) prevails. They are not encouraging vengeance on the part of their surviving relatives. No! They are asking for God to vindicate his own name and honor. The Day of Judgment will be God's answer to this prayer.

Verse 11 becomes important, interpretively, for the entire book of Revelation. It assumes that the persecution that befalls Christians has come to an end, their number is "completed" (6:11). Whatever happens next (6:12-17) is the opening of the sixth seals belongs to something at the very close of history, when, in fact, history has run its course. What follows is a description of the judgment of unbelievers on the Day of Judgment itself.

The Day of Judgment

The language of this final judgment is taken from the Old Testament, from several passages from the prophets. One such passage is [Isaiah 34:4](#):

[Isa 34:4](#) [Rev 6:13-14a](#) All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree. ...and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

What we have here is a vivid and figurative depiction of the Last Judgment. These expressions will occur again as Revelation revisits this scene (e.g. 11:13; 16:18).

When God's wrath falls, it is terrifying. Those who experience it desire to hide themselves from its fierceness. The region of modern Turkey where this letter is addressed is known for its caves in which shelter from passing storms could be sought. Despite their cries for somewhere to hide from God's wrath, they will not find it (6:16).

No one will be able to "stand" on the Day of his wrath (6:17).

It is perhaps most revealing of all that the wrath from which they seek to hide is that of a Lamb! The Lamb will be the judge on the Last Day. "God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ," says Paul ([Rom. 2:16](#)). Jesus himself taught this! Speaking of the "Son of Man" (his favorite self-designation), he said, "The Father...has given Him authority to judge" ([John 5:27](#); cf. [Matt. 7:21](#); [25:31-33](#); [Acts 10:42](#); [17:31](#); [2 Cor. 5:10](#); [2 Thess. 1:7-8](#); [2 Tim. 4:1](#)).

Why is this significant? Because, we can never say that God does not know what we have to endure. The basis of the judgment is because He has become a man. He has been tempted. He has suffered. He knows our human condition. On that basis He will judge.

The chapter ends with this great question: "For the great day of His wrath had come and who can stand?" (6:17).

Who can stand? That's the question which chapter 7 will answer for us. The question is this: not, will I survive the trouble that lies in this world, but will I survive the judgment of the Lamb? And there is only sure way to answer that question. We must believe the message of the gospel that says faith in Jesus Christ delivers us from the wrath which is to come. The great answer of chapter 7 is that every single soul that Jesus seals in this world, will withstand the judgment of the world to come. Every single one! That is a truth worth knowing and making our own.

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