

Revelation Six (vv. 1-8)

The seal judgments unfold during the first 3.5 years of the Tribulation – the “beginning of sorrows” (Matthew 24.8). The first *four* seals reveal a *stampede of sorrows*, with four horses and their horseman bringing a litany of suffering in the form of warfare, famine, pestilence, and disease. The *fifth* seal reveals *suffering saints* – souls slain for the word of God on earth, but now safe in heaven. The *sixth* seal reveals a *seismic shaking* of the earth, gripping earth-dwellers with horror and hopelessness. The *final* seal, containing the trumpet and vial judgments, produces a *session of silence* in heaven (8.1).

It should be remembered that the seal judgments are *preliminary* and largely *providential*. Warfare, famine and death have been operative throughout history but will now be seen in more widespread and intense form. Men will not immediately perceive that a divine hand is upon them in judgment until perhaps the sixth seal (cf. 6.16).

v.1. The **Lamb** opens the seals because the seven sealed scroll has been delivered to Him. The scene is described in Daniel 7.14, “*And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.*” He therefore opens the seals and dispenses the associated judgments to claim the grand inheritance which is His by right of redemption. A wax **seal** guaranteed the integrity of a document, showing it had not been tampered with. When the Lamb opened the first seal, John **heard, as it were the noise of thunder**. This is the only seal accompanied by such a sound, and likely describes the voice of the living creature – it was a ‘thunder-like voice’. “*I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a thunderous voice...*” [NET]. Thunder may also suggest the storm of judgment which is about to break upon the earth. Though the Lamb opens the seal, it is one of the four living creatures that speaks – they are responsible to guard the throne of God, and therefore acts as agents of divine judgment where creation is concerned. **Come and see** should read “Come!” The thundering cry is not an invitation to John, but a command to call forth the horse and its horseman. The great stallion (and its associated judgment) cannot move until divinely summoned.

Seal One: The White Horse of Diplomacy, Delusion and Deception

v.2. Each of the first four seals reveals a symbolic horse and its rider – the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The horse speaks of power, speed and strength, an animal that is fearless in warfare. *Proverbs 21.31: “A horse is prepared for the day of battle, but the victory is from the LORD.”* The coming of these horses and their riders is a declaration of war on the earth. The first horse is **white** – a symbol of peace, prosperity, and apparent righteousness. The other horsemen in the chapter do not represent actual identifiable persons, but are personifications of conditions on earth – war, famine etc. So, this horseman is likely a personification of false Christs promising universal peace and safety through diplomacy and political treaties (cf. Matthew 24.4-5). The chief example of a false Christ is the Antichrist himself. He is *like* Christ, he *impersonates* Christ – but he is not Christ. The horseman has a **bow**, but no arrows, suggestive of conquest at a distance without bloodshed and by diplomacy. His political genius and persuasive promises of a golden age of peace and prosperity will elevate him to a position of supreme leadership – **hence a crown [stephanos] was given unto him**, the victor’s crown of recognition and renown, possibly in the form of the Nobel peace prize! **He went forth conquering, and to conquer** because the ultimate aim of such diplomacy is not world peace but world domination.

The Antichrist will masquerade as a paragon of peace. He will delude the world into a false sense of security delivering a masterstroke of diplomacy by creating and signing a peace treaty to ensure the safety of Israel and re-establishment of the temple system in Jerusalem. This, however, is a deal with the devil, and a “covenant with death” (Isaiah 28.15). It will provide Israel with a false sense of security which will be broken at the mid-point of the Tribulation. Paul speaks of the same in *1 Thessalonians 5.2: “For when they shall say, Peace and safety [white horse]; then sudden destruction cometh”*.

Seal Two: The Red Horse of Destruction

v.3. The Lamb opens the **second seal** which causes the **second beast** (‘like a calf’, 4.7) to say, “Come!”. **v.4. Another** (of the *same* kind) **horse went out** (presumably from heaven) that was **red [pyrros]** in colour. Fiery red is the colour of bloodshed and slaughter as the horseman is **given** (indicates divine permission) to **take “the” (false) peace** from the earth and cause men to **kill** (butcher) **one another** with violence (Matthew 24.7). The horse bears the same colour as the dragon (12.3), which represents the devil, who is a “murderer” from the beginning (John 8.44). The parallel with the language of the Lord Jesus in the Olivet discourse is plain, “*ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars*” and “*nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom*” (Matthew 24.6-7). It is likely the false peace brokered by the man of sin will be quickly punctured by a Russian led militant Muslim coalition described in Ezekiel 38-39. They will move down from the north seeking the swift and total annihilation of Israel. Such an event could be in view under this second seal. The horseman bears a **great sword**, the *machaira* describing a long sword carried in battle by Roman soldiers. Interestingly

the LORD Himself calls for such a sword in Ezekiel 38.21, *“I will call for a sword to attack Gog on all my mountains”*. Further warfare belonging to this period could also be suggested in Daniel 7 as the ‘little horn’ (man of sin) uproots three other horns in his rise to prominence (Daniel 7.8).

Seal Three: The Black Horse of Dearth and Deprivation

v.5. The third seal reveals a **black horse** summoned by the **third beast** (one ‘like a man’, 4.7). Black is the colour of lamentation and mourning as well as famine (Lamentations 5.8-10). Jeremiah speaks of a day of drought saying, *“Judah mourneth... they sit in black upon the ground.”* (Jeremiah 14.2, RV). This colour thus represents the sorrow of extreme deprivation. Warfare has destroyed the world’s food supply chains creating unprecedented economic collapse. A **pair of balances** – two small trays hung from each end of a balance beam – suggests that food is in such short supply it needs to be carefully weighed and rationed (cf. Ezekiel 4.16). **v.6.** Likely, the divine **voice** of the throne-sitter speaks from **the midst of the** four living creatures saying, *“a measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny”*. A **measure** [*choínix*] was a dry unit of around 67 cubic inches (a quart), often used of grain measurements – this was considered enough for one individual’s daily food. A **penny** [*dēnárion*], a small silver coin, was the standard labouring’s man wage for the day. So, what would normally buy about sixteen quarts of wheat will now only buy *one* – and this was only enough for one individual, leaving no provision for the family. Clearly, the warfare of the second seal has caused hyperinflation. The same daily wage could buy **three measures of barley** because this was considered lesser in quality, and used to make bread for the poor, or feed animals. But in wrath, God remembers mercy for a divine decree says *“hurt (damage) not the oil and the wine”*. In the OT, **oil** and **wine** were not regarded as luxuries but as basic supplies (along with grains) to provide for life (Nehemiah 5.11; Joel 2.19). Jim Allen says, *“The oil was for cooking, lighting, washing (equivalent to soap) and healing (ointment) and the wine, in the absence of safe drinkable water, was the normal drink with meals.”* Though food will be expensive, God will preserve the basic essentials. Oil and wine were also used for medicinal purposes, acting as soothing treatments for those who were injured.

Seal Four: The Pale Horse of Death

v.7. With the opening of the **fourth seal**, the fourth living creature (‘like a flying eagle’, 4.6) thunders *“Come!”* **v.8.** The fourth and final horse is **pale** [*chlōros*] in colour. The Greek word supplies the English words *chlorophyll* and *chlorine* and, depending on the context, describes the fresh green colour of healthy grass and plant life or, as here, the sickly yellow-green colour of decay, much like that of a corpse. Death is the sad reality of warfare (second seal), hyperinflation and famine (third seal). The horseman is therefore named **Death** and is accompanied by **Hell** [*Hades*]. Death is a *power* that slays the body; Hades is a *place* that swallows the soul. They are represented here as hostile forces seeking to attack and enslave mortals to bring them into their domain. Fear not dear believer! Christ has the “keys of hell and of death” (Revelation 1.18); He has ultimate authority in *both* realms. These ancient enemies hold no terror for the believer.

Power (authority) was **given unto them** over the **fourth part of the earth**. Death and Hades were given authority to take life in a fourth part of the world’s geographical area. No doubt this is the awful conclusion to the preceding terrors – with people dying by the **sword** (red horse), **hunger** (black horse) and **death** (pale horse). Fanning says, *“These four (sword, famine, pestilence, wild beasts) should be understood as the culminating effects of human anarchy and societal decay associated with the woes of the other three seal judgments (invasion, civil strife, and famine), but launched into motion from heaven as the expression of God’s judgment on sinful humanity.”* Added to these terrors is the authority to kill with [*hupó*] or ‘under’ the **beasts of the earth**. *Thērion* describes wild beasts and likely refers to literal wild animals, either preying on victims due to the scarcity of food, or rats and bats as the spreaders of disease. Alternatively, this could be a reference to the *man of sin* (13.1) and the *false prophet* (13.11) given that the word *thērion* is used to describe them 37 times in Revelation – both their character and vicious reign of terror which marks the last half of the Tribulation.

In all the solemnity of the four horsemen, remember the book of Revelation contains a *fifth* horseman. He is the Horseman of Deity – the Lord Jesus Himself (cf. 19.11). As such, He is the contrast to these dastardly horsemen.

- In contrast to the **white** and **red** horses, Christ will bring lasting, genuine, and universal peace – both political and spiritual. *Isaiah 2.4: “Nations will not take up the sword against other nations, and they will no longer train for war.”*
- In contrast to the **black** horse, Christ will establish a superabundant prosperity on earth the likes of which the world has never seen. *Amos 9.13: “Be sure of this, the time is coming, says the Lord, when the plowman will catch up to the reaper and the one who stomps the grapes will overtake the planter. Juice will run down the slopes; it will flow down all the hillsides.”* [NET].
- In contrast to the **pale** horse, Christ is not “Death” and “Hell” but the “Word of life”. Death will be rare, even the exception, during the millennial reign. Those who die at 100 years of age will be considered as children (Isaiah 65.20).