

Chapter 6

The Breaking of the First Six Seals

6:1-8

- A. The scroll has been taken (5:7)
 - a. John likely thought that either he or someone else would read what was written in the scroll.
 - b. Instead, he first sees horses galloping into view...
 - i. The scroll turned out to be "illustrated" whose "pictures" leapt from the page!
 - ii. The first 4 seals reveal 4 horses and their riders.
 - 1. Much of this symbolism would have been familiar to both Jews and Christians of the day:
 - a. Horse = war
 - b. The number and coloration of the horses had OT roots
 - i. Zech 1:8-10
 - ii. Zech 6:1-7
 - iii. Tell of 4 different colored horses used in God's service
 - iv. However there are significant differences here and there...
 - 1. Zechariah = chariots; Rev. = riders
 - 2. Zechariah = brought report; Rev. = brought destruction
 - 3. The colors are different here and there too.
 - 2. These are among the more well known images of Revelation.
 - a. Movies, book, religious leaders, art/paintings, etc.
 - b. Many reflect a misunderstanding of the 4 horseman

THE FIRST SEAL

- B. Verse 1
 - a. The first seal is broken.
 - b. The first living creature – the one that was like a lion – speaks. (4:7)
 - c. "Come" is a command to the riders – not addressed to John.
- C. Verse 2
 - a. "a white horse..." with "...a bow"; "a crown was given to him..."
 - i. Some believe this is a symbol of a prediction that Rome would suffer at the hands of the Parthians...

- ii. Some simply believe it represents a conquering force...
- b. Much of the symbolism of this first seal relates to the theme of victory
 - i. The rider carried a bow, a weapon that symbolized military might...
 - ii. The white horse among the ancients symbolized victory
 - iii. The crown given to the rider was not a ruling crown but a “stephanos” – crown of victory
 - iv. The words translated conquering and conquer are from the verb form of the work nike – literally meaning victory.
- c. Can we identify this victorious rider?
 - i. We know the fourth horseman is “death” (v8)
 - 1. Because of this, perhaps each rider can be given a general label.
 - ii. Those who adhere to the “historical” approach of interpretation identify the white rider as a specific historical character.
 - iii. Those who adhere to the “futurist” (Premillennialists) approach identify this rider as the “Anti-christ” – whom they think is a specific individual.
 - 1. Keep in mind, as a rule, apocalyptic descriptions do not tie to earthly historical individuals.
 - iv. Some believe this rider to be Jesus.
 - 1. He does appear on a white horse in chapter 19.
 - 2. However, this is the only *real*/connection between the two – the other details are in contrast to each other.
 - v. The context favors the view that the first rider should be identified along with the other three – i.e., an essential part of the destructive forces set loose on earth.
 - 1. Note the following points:
 - a. Each rider is introduced the same way – by one of four creatures
 - b. They functioned as a unit – each one supplemented the others
 - c. Four is the cosmic number or number of creation suggesting they would all be tied to the earth’s devastation in the vision.
 - vi. Most likely it does not represent Christ...but it does represent a victory.
 - 1. Rev. does not hesitate in ascribing victory to the forces of evil (13:7)...but their victory is short-lived.
 - 2. This rider is most likely intended as a contrast to the rider in chap. 19.
 - 3. This horseman appeared to be victorious...but the true victor (chap. 19) is Jesus.
 - vii. So if it’s not Christ, what might he be labeled?
 - 1. Imperialism – the desire to control others.

2. Greed – lustful desire in general; often met with opposition and results in conflict.
- viii. The first rider set the stage for the second rider: war.

THE SECOND SEAL

D. Verse 3

- a. Again, the second living creature issues a command – “Come”

E. Verse 4

- a. The word “red” is related to the Greek word meaning “fire”.
- b. The word “sword” is not the same word as in 1:16 and 2:12.
 - i. This word here is a close-combat sword often used by the Roman army.
 - ii. It is called “great” because it was a major factor in the military victories of Rome.
- c. This second rider cannot be mistaken
 - i. He rode a blood-red horse
 - ii. He drove peace from the earth
 - iii. He persuaded men to kill one another
 - iv. He wielded the deadly combat sword made famous by the Romans
 - v. He is cruel, bloody and causes devastation among nations and families.
 - vi. He is war.

THE THIRD SEAL

F. Verse 5

- a. Black is generally associated with grief and mourning in Scripture (Is. 50:3; Jer. 4:28; 14:2)
 - i. Sometimes, as it is here, it is associated with a lack of food (Jer. 14:1, 2; Lam. 5:10).
- b. This rider carries a pair of scales – unusual for a horseman.
 - i. Most likely to weigh out the grain mentioned.
 - ii. The need to weigh one’s food implied (at that time) a limited supply.
 1. At least the amount that the average man could afford was limited as denoted by the mention of the “denarius” in verse 6.

G. Verse 6

- a. The speaker is not identified, but it is most likely one of the four creatures.
- b. Denarius is a transliteration of the Greek word “denarion”
 - i. The NIV has “a day’s wages” – true for a common laborer.

- ii. A quart (or measure) of wheat would support a person of moderate appetite for about a day.
 - 1. In troubled times, such as depicted, a workman would only earn enough for himself with none left over for his family.
 - 2. A man with a family would then buy barley
 - a. Coarse grain normally served to animals
 - b. But it was cheaper...
- c. What about the olive oil and wine?
 - i. The ordinary citizen could not afford these
 - ii. What does the message mean – “do not damage” --?
 - 1. Most likely “keep your hands off – these are not for you!”
 - 2. Some, however, believe it to mean there was an abundance of these things while there was a shortage of the grain.
- d. When the third horseman came through the land, the common workman worked from sunrise to sunset and made only enough to feed his family – no clothes, no housing, nothing else!
- e. The third horseman could simply be identified as famine – easily an aftermath of war.

THE FOURTH SEAL

H. Verse 7

- a. The aftermath of war is not done...the fourth horseman is about to ride out...

I. Verse 8

- a. The fourth rider's horse was “ashen”
 - i. Some translations may say “pale”
 - ii. Some might even say “green” as this is a more literal translation of the Greek word *chloros* used here...
 - 1. The NRSV uses “pale green”
 - 2. The hue of a corpse's flesh
- b. The fourth rider is Death.
 - i. This rider gathered up the ravaged harvest of the other riders.
 - ii. Hades, the waiting place or abode of the dead, followed closely behind.
 - 1. In Revelation, Hades is always paired with Death (1:18; 20:13,14)
 - 2. They would work together...Death claimed the body; Hades claimed the soul.
 - iii. Death is often pictured as a hooded rider with a skull face
 - iv. Hades is often pictured as an open grave or even a ghoulish creature stumbling along behind.

1. Could also be viewed as an ominous black cloud swallowing those taken down by the pale rider.
- c. In addition to the horrible harvest left by the first three riders, Death and Hades were to bring destruction wherever they went; they were to kill...
 - i. With the sword
 - ii. With famine
 - iii. With pestilence/plague
 - iv. By the wild beasts of the earth
 - d. The word "sword" is not the sword of verse 4 but a rhomphaia – a large battle sword.
 - e. The word "pestilence" is simply the word for "plague".
 - i. Death has often used throughout history to refer to plagues:
 1. Black Death (bubonic plague)
 2. Red Death (small-pox)
 3. White Death (tuberculosis)
 - f. Added to these is the threat of wild beasts.
 - g. "A fourth of the earth..."
 - i. Simply indicates a significant portion of those living
 - h. Note the significance between these four agents of Death (sword, famine, wild beasts and plague) and those used by God to punish Jerusalem for her sins in Ezekiel 14.
- J. So...what do the four horsemen represent?
- a. Some believe they represent God's plan to punish the Romans.
 - b. But...you can't get that specific because notice:
 - i. 4 is a cosmic or creation number representing ALL humanity.
 - ii. These tragedies are universal in nature and experienced by any who fall into the path of these "four horsemen"
 - iii. So, a more general interpretation is in order.
 1. It must blend universal ideas/principles with the realities of what the first-century Christians faced.

As a result of man's greed (the first horseman), turmoil and trials (the second and third horsemen) were turned loose on the world. Adding to the suffering were the tribulations inherent in a sinful world (the fourth horseman).

Turmoil, trials and tribulations are the lot of all men, but Christians receive a double portion: Not only are they followers of Jesus subject to the normal vicissitudes of life, but they are also misunderstood and often persecuted for their faith.

- c. Instead of the 4 horsemen appearing in some kind of chronological order (as some historical interpretations would have you believe), they appear in logical order.
 - i. Imperialism is followed by...
 - ii. War, which is followed by...
 - iii. Economic hardship (or famine), which is followed by...
 - iv. Death.
- d. Why would God begin his "revelation" of the scroll writings like this?
 - i. To prepare Christians for what was ahead.
 - ii. To emphasize that God was still in control.
 - 1. Note the 4 horsemen did nothing that they were not allowed to do – they had to be summoned!
 - iii. To stress that God limits the problems of Christians.
 - 1. Note that Death only had authority over a fourth of the earth.
 - 2. Seems odd since everyone dies.
 - 3. God only allowed death in a limited fashion.
 - iv. To teach that God is active in all events, whether one thinks of them as "good" or "bad".
 - 1. God is working out His purposes.
 - 2. God knows what He is doing.
 - 3. Our challenge is to learn to trust Him.

THE FIFTH SEAL

What would the breaking of the 5th seal reveal? It would not have been at all unexpected to for John to see carnage and the aftermath of death and destruction...but he did not...

K. Verse 9

- a. Several facts stand out to us here due to context and description:
 - i. Those depicted were martyrs.
 - 1. The word "testimony" comes from the root word "martus" which is where we get our English word martyr.
 - 2. The word "slain" is the same word used concerning Jesus' death.
 - ii. They had been killed for the same reason John was exiled: their testimony of Christ.
 - 1. They gave their lives for the cause of Christ.
 - 2. Jesus warned this would happen (Matt. 24:9)
 - a. Stephen was stoned (Acts 7:58-60)
 - b. James was beheaded (Acts 12:1,2; Mark 6:22-29)

- c. Christian martyrs can be found throughout history!
- d. By the time Revelation was written notable others were claimed as martyrs for the cause of Christ:
 - i. Paul
 - ii. Timothy
 - iii. Luke
 - iv. The remaining 12 apostles except John
- iii. John did not see their bodies but their souls.
 - 1. The word here – psuche – can also mean life.
 - 2. The origin of our word “psyche”
- iv. These saints were still alive.
 - 1. Death was not/is not the end.
 - 2. They were aware of what had happened to them.
- v. The persecution had been going on for some time (v 10)
 - 1. But many others would be killed as they had been (v 11)
- b. But what about other details that are not as obvious perhaps?
 - i. “underneath the altar”
 - 1. This symbolism causes reflection to primarily sacrifice.
 - 2. Some debate whether this altar is the altar of incense or the altar of burnt offering...generally speaking, it doesn't matter because the central theme is still “sacrifice”.
 - 3. This is both an Old and New Testament reference of course...
 - a. Old referring back to the time of priests and regular sacrifices for atonement
 - i. Ex. 40:26,27
 - ii. Ex. 39:39; 40:29
 - b. New referring to the spiritual sacrifices offered by Christ as well as Christians
 - i. Heb. 10:10,12
 - ii. Heb. 13:15
 - iii. Rom. 12:1
- L. Verse 10
 - a. The question asked here is pivotal.
 - i. It contains an air of complaint, but no disrespect is intended.

- ii. "Lord" is a translation of the word "despotes" – where we get our word despot who is a ruler with absolute power.
 - 1. It could also be easily translated "Master"
 - 2. It is as a slave addressing the one who had complete control over their life.
- iii. "holy" acknowledged God's purity and sinless-ness
- iv. "true" was a simple recognition of God keeping his promises – including those to avenge His people
- v. These believers did not question whether God would avenge them, but when.

M. Verse 11

- a. God answers in a peculiar way
 - i. They were given white robes and told to rest
 - 1. God was not ignoring them...but perhaps did not directly answer their question because they would not understand God's overall plan and purposes.
 - 2. As humans, we often struggle with this.
 - a. Perhaps this was God's way of saying: Trust me – I will take care of you and it will be all right
 - ii. They were told to rest until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been would be completed also.
 - 1. There was no set number – the original text indicates vagueness – only that some more would be killed...
 - 2. Some would say, "how could God allow the godly to be killed rather than intervene?"
 - a. God does not look upon death as humans do...
 - b. Death is not the end but the beginning of the next life...
 - c. And God does not view time the same either...but allowing more time to pass, it gave others the opportunity to repent.
- b. When we look at the actions of God, we see God working out his plan and trying to convey the idea to these martyrs that he is still in control and they should be patient.
- c. This is a principle we see played out throughout Bible history time and again.

THE SIXTH SEAL

- N. This, in a way, is the more direct answer to the question asked in verse 10 – "How long?"
 - a. If the answer given after the fifth seal is – "Not yet, trust me, it will happen though", then the answer here is – "enough is enough; no more!"

O. This passage can be split in two parts:

- a. The picture of the devastation of the universe (vv. 12-14)
- b. The depiction of terrified men (vv. 15-17)

P. End of the world passage?

- a. Are verses 12-14 a literal depiction of the end of the world?
 - i. Probably not...although the imagery used is in accordance with the teaching of the judgment and the return of Christ.
 - ii. So why use this language?
 1. This passage uses a combination of terms from the OT as well as Jewish literature.
 2. It piles together every terrifying thing that John's audience would have known to represent the picture of terror to those who opposed God.
 3. In essence, the emphasis of the passage is the wrath of God – regardless of when that wrath is incurred.

Q. Verse 12

- a. Apocalyptic writers would often use the image of an earthquake to symbolize the "shaking up" of that which people depend upon more than they realize – the "solid earth"
- b. Even today, we refer to some events as "earth-shaking" or "earth-shattering"...
- c. Earthquake, "sun became black", and the "moon became blood" are all found in various apocalyptic and prophetic writings:
 - i. Ezekiel 38:19; Joel 2:10; Amos 8:8; Hag. 2:6
 - ii. Joel 2:31; Is. 13:10; 50:3; Ezek. 32:7; Amos 8:9
- d. Sackcloth was used for making garments in times of mourning.
 - i. The one in verse 12 was most likely made from the hair of black goats.

R. Verse 13

- a. "falling of stars"
 - i. Some believe this to be the downfall of important personalities...
 - ii. However, this image is part of the total picture and this detail itself probably has no significance other than what it contributes to that total picture – a picture of great turbulence...
- b. "unripe figs" – a type which grows during the winter and never comes to maturity but falls off in the spring.

S. Verse 14

- a. "the sky" – rolled up like a scroll that breaks while being opened.
- b. The use of "mountain" and "island" would be used to show that no part of the earth would go untouched as islands are "sea mountains"

T. Verse 15

- a. From this point, the focus shifts from the destruction itself to the effects of the destruction.
- b. The seven classes mentioned here would give an idea of encompassing all of mankind
 - i. Kings of the earth – likely would bring to mind men like Domitian
 - ii. Great men – powerful men who were not political rulers
 - iii. Commanders – military
 - iv. Rich
 - v. Strong – not physically strong but those perhaps with strong influence
 - vi. Slave and free man
 1. A free man would have been a former slave who had gained his freedom
 2. They were both on the bottom rung of the social ladder of the day
 - a. Usually members of the other 5 classes had nothing to do with them
 - vii. But to God, social distinctions do not matter for God does not show partiality (Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:9-11)
- c. They tried to hide in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains...
 - i. Adam and Eve tried
 - ii. Jonah tried
 - iii. But each found, as we know, that hiding from God is impossible
 - iv. But the guilty will always try to do so...

U. Verse 16

- a. "the wrath of the Lamb"
 - i. Keep in mind that the throne of God is also the throne of the Lamb
 - ii. What One does, the Other does
 - iii. But doesn't that seem an odd phrase?
 1. Who could imagine a sweet lamb deliberately hurting someone?
 2. In movies, it's the unexpected antagonists that are often more terrifying than the expected one.
- b. Sinners ought not fear death the most...they ought to fear the wrath of God most!

V. Verse 17

- a. "The great day of wrath..."
 - i. Eventually, God will judge...He will avenge.
 - ii. Does this refer to the destruction of the Roman empire or the end of the age?
 1. Most scholars are fairly equally divided.
 - a. The destruction of the Roman Empire would be the most direct, personal and specific response God could give to the cry of the martyrs.
 - i. Reading Chapters 17 through 19 show this depiction...and many believe this passage directly relates to the request of 6:10.
 - b. A case could be made that it refers to the final "great day"
 - i. No OT passage combines all figures of destruction as this text does.
 - ii. Certain aspects of the imagery remind us of events that will occur at the end of the world:
 1. Gathering of all humanity
 2. Universal acknowledgement of the Father and the Son
 - iii. The mention of the Lamb makes this scene unique as OT passages similar to this do not mention Christ.
 - c. Truth is – we don't know for sure...
 2. Overall, this question is relatively unimportant – the emphasis is that the wrath of the Lord comes to those who oppose Him...
 - a. It came for Babylon
 - b. It came for Assyria (Ninevah)
 - c. It came for Rome
 - d. And it will come for any who stand in opposition to God and His Word.
- b. "Who is able to stand?"
 - i. This question has been asked before:
 1. Nahum 1:6 – "Who can stand before His indignation?"
 2. Malachi 3:2 – "Who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?"
 3. Ezra 9:15 – "O LORD God of Israel...no one can stand before you..."
 4. The full answer is that no one who is unprepared can stand before the LORD.
 - ii. Note the contrasts between the martyrs (9-11) and the unprepared (15-17)
 1. One cried "Avenge us!" while the others cried "Hide us!"
 2. Those who suffered were not separated from God...but those who sinned were.

3. The martyrs asked "How long?" while the unprepared cried, "Who is able to stand?"
 - a. The answer – those who do the will of God!
 - b. In 7:9 there will be a great multitude who will stand before the throne and the Lamb.
 - c. At the time the martyrs asked "How long?", the persecutors were standing while the persecuted lay dead in the streets...
 - d. In the end, it will be God's people who will stand...while the wicked are struck down by the wrath of God...

End with the song – "There's A Great Day Coming"

CHAPTER 7 – An Interlude