

The Seven Seals (part 1)
The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse
(Sermon 13 – Rev. 6:1-8)
12.29.24

Please turn in your Bibles to Revelation chapter 6.

We have made it through the first 5 chapters in Revelation. We've seen the glorious vision of Christ in ch. 1, the letters from Jesus to the 7 churches in chapters 2 and 3, the vision of God's throne in ch. 4, and then in ch. 5, we rejoiced together in seeing Jesus as the Lion who conquered because He was the Lamb who was slain for our sins.

It was also in chapter 5 that we saw for the first time a scroll in the hand of God the Father – a scroll that contains the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan, including judgment for those who reject Christ, and reward for those who trust in Him. John describes this scroll as sealed with 7 seals. And that chapter ended with all of heaven and earth worshiping Christ as the only one worthy to open the scroll and enact the final consummation of God's redemptive plan.

These things are meant to be encouraging – first to the original audience of 7 persecuted churches of John's time, but also to God's people for all time – to encourage us in our suffering, to remind us Christ is near, and Christ reigns.

Now today, beginning here in chapter 6, and what will continue for much of the Book, we are starting to wade into deeper waters – not deeper as in more profound truth, but deeper in the symbolism and deeper in difficulty to understand them.

Jesus has now taken the scroll, and he begins to break open each of the 7 seals. And even before the contents of the scroll are revealed, each time Jesus breaks a seal, something happens – a different judgment of God is revealed.

So, let's read Rev. 6:1-8, and then we're going to pray...

<p>[6:1] Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" [2] And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out</p>
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conquering, and to conquer. [3] When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!"

[4] And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword. [5] When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand.

[6] And I heard what seemed to be 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 wine!"

[7] When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!"

[8] And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

(Let's Pray)

Recently, Noah and I went camping with another group of fathers and sons. We had a great time.

Typically, I'm not big on camping. I love spending time with my son. I love fishing and cooking over an open fire. But some people are *really* into camping. That's how they relax. I don't get it. I can't understand why anyone would rather sleep in a tent, on the ground, and leave a perfectly good bed empty at home.

But whether you're into camping or not, everyone knows you need to go prepared. You need the right gear – things you know you'll need, and things that you may need, you take just in case.

It's the same with our study of Revelation. The previous chapters we've covered have prepared us for what is to come. And as we get deeper in our hike, deeper into the weeds, we need to be sure to bring along with us the tools we'll need.

That's why, unlike other sermons, I want to spend the first half of today's message gathering our tools, and preparing us to approach this section of Revelation. Then, for the second half of the sermon, we will then take our tools and unpack our verses in Rev. 6.

First, in preparing us for our journey, let me start by recommending excellent books and resources for you to read along the way:

-Commentaries, in order of thickness, small to large:

- “Let’s Study Revelation” by Derek Thomas
- “Revelation” by Leon Morris (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, or TNTC)
- “The Book of Revelation” by Robert Mounce (NICoNT)

-Study aids on eschatology, or the end times:

- Sam Storms, “Kingdom Come”
- “The Bible and the Future” by Anthony Hoekema
- Wayne Grudem, “Systematic Theology”

Now, another thing we need to do to prepare for our journey, just as you would look at a map to see where you’re going, we need to look at the big picture and ask some questions.

One question that some of you parents might be asking this morning is, “Pastor Scott, did you intentionally plan to preach on the four horsemen of the apocalypse one the same Sunday when we don’t have childcare?” No, I did not. My apologies for that. But, it could serve for some great lunchtime discussions.

But seriously, we do need to ask some questions of this text in ch. 6 and the chapters that follow: For instance, “What’s going on with these horsemen and these seals? Are these judgments that are yet to come, or have already happened? What is God intending to communicate through these visions?”

Remember that the Book of Revelation is meant to be read as one letter, not disconnected sections. One chapter depends on another. Context is key. So, even though time limits us on how much we can unpack in one sermon, we are meant to see these chapters as a part of the whole.

For instance, the judgment of God that is being communicated in these visions are being portrayed here in ch. 6 as seals on a scroll being broken. In chapters 7 and 8 and following, we will see God’s judgments portrayed as trumpets being blown and as bowls being poured out. Seals, trumpets, bowls, all symbols used to portray God’s judgment, all connected. They are all linked.

And how we see them linked will determine how we interpret each one. So, we have to ask some questions that scholars have been asking for centuries:

- 1) Are these judgments something that have already happened, are they all future judgments to come, or is it a mixture of both?
- 2) Are we to understand these judgments (the seals, the trumpets and the bowls) as different events happening in chronological order, or do they overlap as three different descriptions of the same events?

Well let me tell you honestly – we don't know. Some scholars and teachers come down firmly and convincingly, claiming they know for sure the answer to these questions. And some would even argue unless you agree with their interpretation of the timing and meaning of these events, you are not being faithful to Scripture.

I am NOT saying that. There are some things that are clear in Scripture, particularly those things concerning salvation and living godly lives. We can know clearly and be unified completely on these things.

But there are things that are not as clear. And the timing of these events in Revelation is just one example.

So...what can we know for sure concerning end times, and where can Christians be confident and unified? Wayne Grudem helps us identify those. Most Christians agree:

1. There will be a sudden, personal, visible, bodily return of Christ
2. We should eagerly long for Christ's return
3. We do not know when Christ will return
4. The final results of Christ's return will be wonderful for the Church

These are the things that we agree on as Evangelical Christians, and I think that's important.

But there are secondary issues we don't always agree on, especially when it comes to the questions of the "how" and the "when" of the events leading up to Christ's return and after His return.

And for these, our goal should not be a total convincing argument, but clarity. A growing, humbling clarity of what these events could be, and how they should cause us to see Christ more clearly.

Speaking of the timing of these events, you may remember in our very first sermon in this series, I laid out four major camps of interpreting the events of Revelation:

-First, you have those who believe that all the events in Revelation have already happened in the 1st century – it's all in the past. They are “**preterists**”, meaning past.

-Others approach Revelation as kind of a road map for the future, that everything mentioned in Revelation is all yet to happen. They are called “**futurists**”.

-A third camp are those who think Revelation is more like an illustration or allegory that represent different stages of church history. They are the “**historicists**”.

-Yet another approach called the “**Idealist**” that says none of Revelation is to be taken literally, that it's all symbolic, and represents general spiritual principles for us to learn.

I actually don't fit into any of those categories. For instance:

-I believe some events already happened in the 1st century, directly connected to the 7 churches Revelation was written to.

-I believe some things are happening right now, in ways we don't yet fully understand.

-And I believe there are some things clearly yet to come, as in the Second Coming of Christ, the full measure of God's wrath poured out on mankind, and the full consummation of all things brought under Christ's rule.

THE FIRST FOUR SEALS

NOW, with those tools in hand and our gear packed, we come to the second half of the message when we take a look at our text today, identify these images for what they are, and then we will consider how all of this

fits together. Here in Revelation 6:1-8, this is what John sees as the first four seals are opened:

Jesus Christ, the Lion / Lamb, is worthy to take and open the scroll of God's will. In the slow process of opening this scroll with each of its 7 seals, Jesus breaks the first seal.

1. THE WHITE HORSE (6:1-2)

[6:1] Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" [2] And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.

This is the first of what we call the "four horsemen of the Apocalypse", four figures of God's judgment that are unleashed on mankind.

So, Jesus opens the first of 7 seals, and John sees, what we presume is on the earth, a white horse. All through Revelation, horses symbolize war. That made perfect sense to 1st century Christians since horses were often used in battle.

The rider of this horse has a bow and a crown. The bow also represents warfare, and the crown is the authority given to this rider to go and execute God's judgment on the earth. That's what his purpose is, plainly stated by John, "he came out conquering, and to conquer".

Some think this could be a depiction of Jesus Himself, pointing to Rev. 19. But the context of ch 6 is very different than 19. Here, the rider on the white horse is one of four charged with destruction. No hint of that in ch. 19. This is more likely a reference to the spirit of militarism and warfare, set loose on the earth, bringing disaster.

2. THE RED HORSE (6:3-4)

[3] When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" [4] And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

Red represents bloodshed, and death by the sword. Each of the four riders is given authority to bring some form of God's judgment to the earth. The rider of the red horse is given the authority to "take peace from the earth".

If the rider of the white horse represents external war between nations, the rider of the red horse seems to represent internal conflict, civil war, the people of a single nation fighting each other.

So far, just with these first two seals broken and the first two horses and riders identified, we have war without and war within.

3. THE BLACK HORSE (6:5-6)

[5] When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand.

The scales or balances in the rider's hand are used to weigh things out, like they would weigh wheat or barley in the market. For this third horse and its rider, they represent global famine.

This is confirmed by verse 6...

[6] And I heard what seemed to be 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 wine!"

A denarius was the equivalent of an entire day's wage. That means one man was working all day for just enough food to sustain him, with nothing left for a wife and children. These prices represent 10-12 times the normal price for food. It would be like you and I having to pay around \$50 for a loaf of bread.

So far, we see depicted in the first 3 horsemen: global war, civil war, leading to economic inflation and widespread famine.

But what about that last thing the voice declared..."do not harm the oil and wine"? The roots of the olive tree and grape vine go down deep – if you destroy those, you damage what will come in the future. This seems to be a hint that the famine, while incredibly destructive, is limited. It would not last forever.

And finally from the text today, when Jesus opens a fourth seal of the scroll, we see the fourth rider, on...

4. THE PALE HORSE (6:7-8)

[7] When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" [8] And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

In the original language, this horse is not so much pale as in a grayish green. It's meant to depict the color of a corpse, of death itself. Just when it looked like things couldn't get worse with global war, civil war, economic collapse and famine, now we have death itself being unleashed.

Now, death is already in the equation with all of these other calamities, so what's different about this fourth horse and rider?

One thing that's different is there are other means of death mentioned besides war. Here we have people dying of the sword and famine, but also with pestilence (or widespread disease) and even wild beasts.

Another thing that is different about this rider, is that death is not alone. Hades is with him. This is a depiction of the grave. The finality of death for those who do not trust in Christ. And an entire one-fourth of the population are killed by these various means of wild animals and plagues and war and disease.

Now, what does all of this mean?

We have to go back to our tools, our backpack of resources we are bringing with us. Are these things depicted things that have already happened, are they things limited to the distant future when Christ returns, or are they happening now?

Since I've laid my cards on the table as to how I believe these events are to be interpreted, to answer my own question, is this past, present or future, I would say, "Yes". (A qualified yes.)

Here's what I mean: We start with an understanding that the "Last Days" is the period of time between Jesus' first coming (as a baby in a manger) to

His Second Coming, which will take place sometime in the future. That means you and I – right now – are living in the Last Days.

Add to that, the description of war and famine and disease and death are connected with the original audience of this Book. John received this vision and wrote it out and delivered it to 7 churches of Asia Minor, many of them being persecuted by Rome and seeing a lot of death and destruction. So, they would likely see the description of what is taking place in these visions as things that were happening already, and events that would happen in their lifetime.

However, there are obviously some of these judgments that grow in intensity that cannot be described by only events of the past. Because of that, some of these events are yet to come.

Now, when it comes to these seals of God's judgment, (and we've only gotten to 4 of the 7), and when we see them all in light of the coming chapters that will include the 7 trumpets of God's judgment and the 7 bowls of God's judgment, it could be that these are 21 different events in chronological order, all taking place just before the 2nd coming of Christ.

OR it **could be** that these are not all separate chronological events, but they could be an overlapping of the same events – some of them in the past, some in the present, some in the future.

Whatever your take on these symbols, this much is clear: The closer you get to the 7th seal, the 7th trumpet and the 7th bowl, the closer you get to the coming of Christ. And these judgments will increase in intensity. We will see that as we go deeper into the book.

Application

Now, let's stop and take a breath. We've hiked a lot of miles and covered a lot today. So as I close, let's stop and be reminded why all of this is important and what we should be taking away from today.

Remember, Revelation was originally written to 7 churches in the 1st century. This letter was meant to affect them in ways that are meant for us as well...

1. Be encouraged.

While it's a fearful thing to read these descriptions and imagine the terrifying judgment of God, remember that for those who are in Christ, you will never be the target of God's judgment. The judgments of God that we

read of in Revelation, particularly the ones connected to the future, are for the wicked, for those who have rejected Christ. We may be affected by the darkness of this world while we have to live in it. But God knows how to protect His Church and fulfill His promise that the gates of Hell would not prevail.

2. Be prepared to suffer well.

Whatever you believe about these judgments and the timing of them, we must remember that, from the very beginning of the early church, Christians have suffered. Jesus promised we would. Our world is broken. Sin and darkness cover the world. And no matter who is or is not in the White House, this world is gradually going to get worse. But that's why we are here. To shine a light into the darkness. And that brings us to the third reminder we need to come away with today...

3. Be on mission.

When Jesus ascended into heaven after his resurrection, the crowd was standing, staring into heaven trying to catch one more glimpse of the Savior. And an angel appeared among them and said, "Why are you standing around gazing? The way he left, He will come again." In other words, Jesus is coming back. But don't stand around staring at the sky. Let's get busy with the mission He's given us, to go and make disciples of all the earth.

We should long for His appearing. I pray for it often. But we must not stand around and do nothing until He returns. We should be spreading the gospel far and wide.

And much like our text today, that gospel we are called to spread includes bad news and good news. The bad news is that all who reject Christ will one day face the judgments described in these verses. But the good news is that those who surrender their lives to Jesus now will not fall under God's judgment. That's because Jesus already took all our judgment, all our punishment, all our sin and shame when He hung on the cross.

If you trust in yourself, you will be judged on your own merits. And the Bible says our best works are as filthy rags unto God.

But when you trust in Christ, who already took God's judgment for you, now and forever, you will be the recipients of God's forgiveness and grace.

Conclusion

There is only one Savior, only one who died for our sins, only one who is unshakable, only one who is Sovereign over all, only One who saves through faith in Him and gives eternal hope and peace, and only one who is building an indestructible Church.

That one is Jesus Christ. Keep your hope in Him alone, and keep telling others about Him, until He comes.

(Let's Pray)