

THE SIX SEALS
Revelation 6
By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Today we will study one of the most famous topics in Revelation, the four horsemen of the apocalypse.
2. Turn to Revelation 6.
3. To understand Revelation 6, we need to remember FOUR things:
 - i. The prophecies of Revelation have a first-century fulfillment.
 1. In the first few verses John writes that this is a revelation of “what must soon take place,” and “the time is near” (Rev 1:1, 3).
 2. Revelation is not about what will happen in the twenty-first century or later. It was written to first-century Christians about what would happen in the first century.
 - ii. The theme of Revelation is God’s judgment on Israel.
 1. On several occasions Jesus prophesied judgment against Israel for rejecting the gospel. They killed prophets, Christians, even God’s Messiah (Mt 23:33-38; Lk 13:33).
 2. He even said that God’s judgment would come on that very generation (Mt 23:36; Mt 24:34).
 3. Revelation 1:7 announces the book’s theme; that Christ is coming in judgment against “those who pierced him. All the tribes of the earth will mourn over him.”
 4. Revelation is a vision of God’s wrath against Israel that would come shortly after the book was written.
 - iii. The seven-sealed scroll is God’s divorce certificate against Israel.
 1. In the OT, Israel is depicted as God’s wife (Is 54:5; Jer 31:31-32). When she is unfaithful to God, this is called adultery/harlotry (Jer 3:9; Jer 5:7; Eze 23:37). In the Bible a divorce was made official with a certificate (Dt 24:1, 3; Is 50:1; Mt 5:31; Mt 19:7; Mk 10:4). And the punishment for adultery was death by stoning (Lev 20:10; Dt 22:21).
 2. The book of the Revelation talks about two women: the harlot (Rev 17) and the bride (Rev 19:7). The harlot is Israel, God’s unfaithful wife who has rejected and crucified the Messiah. The Bride is the church. Revelation is not about the end times. It is about God divorcing and punishing unfaithful Israel, and getting a new wife, the church.
 3. In Revelation 4, John sees a vision of God seated on His throne in heaven, ready to pass judgment.
 4. In Revelation 5, still part of the same vision, God is holding a scroll with seven seals. This is a divorce certificate against Israel. The seven

seals represent the seven-fold judgment that God promised against Israel if they ever broke the covenant (Lev 26:18, 21, 24, 28).

5. In Revelation 6, Jesus unseals the scroll, one seal at a time. And each seal is a vision of impending judgment against first century Israel.
 6. In this chapter Christ opens six of the seven seals. There's a break in chapter seven, and then He opens the seventh seal in chapter 8.
- iv. Jesus destroyed the nation of Israel in 70 AD.
1. Remember that Christ prophesied that judgment would be poured out on Israel in that generation.
 2. This judgment came in 70 AD.
 3. Since the birth of Christianity, the Jews had been persecuting Christians all around the Roman empire.
 4. Then from AD 64-68, under the emperor Nero, the Roman empire began to persecute Christians.
 5. Revelation was written in AD 65-66 predicting God's judgment against Israel.
 6. In AD 66, the Jews rebelled against Rome, causing Rome to invade Israel, and slowly, systematically destroy Israel, one city at a time. The war finally ended in 70 AD when the Roman army completely destroyed, leveled, and burned down the city of Jerusalem, including the temple.
 7. We have a detailed record of these events in the writings of a Jewish historian named Josephus who lived through the events.
 8. The destruction of Jerusalem as been called "the most soul-stirring struggle of all ancient history."
 9. The Jewish people were left without a government, a temple, a country.
 10. It is recorded that 1,100,000 people in Jerusalem, 11,000 from starvation. Those spared were sold to enslavement or entertainment to be butchered in the coliseum – 97,000.
 11. The book of Revelation is mostly a prophecy of the events that would be fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.
4. One other thing to keep in mind is that in Revelation, John's prophecies are very similar to the prophecies in the Old Testament. As John is prophesying God's judgment against Israel in the first century, he uses the same language as the OT prophets as they prophesied judgment against nations centuries earlier. Understanding this makes the book much easier to interpret. This will become apparent as we go through this chapter.
5. Let's take a look at the meaning of each seal, one at a time.

II. THE SIX SEALS

1. The first seal.

- i. **Revelation 6:1-2** 1 Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, “Come!” 2 I looked, and there was a white horse. Its rider held a bow; a crown was given to him, and he went out as a conqueror in order to conquer.
- ii. Overview:
 - 1. The Lamb opens the first seal.
 - 2. A white horse appeared. Its rider held a bow. He had a crown. He went out as a conqueror in order to conquer.
- iii. Interpretation:
 - 1. The white horse either represents the Roman empire who is given authority to go out and destroy Israel. Or it represents Jesus Christ¹, who works through the Roman empire to destroy Israel. Or it represents an angel (Rev 7:2).
- iv. Whether Christ or Rome, the white horse represents victorious war against Israel. The other three horsemen represent the terrors that accompany war.

2. The second seal.

- i. **Revelation 6:3-4** 3 When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” 4 Then another horse went out, a fiery red one, and its rider was allowed to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another. And a large sword was given to him.
- ii. Overview:
 - 1. Second horseman is red. He is allowed to take peace from the earth.
- iii. Interpretation:
 - 1. The second horseman represents the terrible bloodshed of war would lead up to and include the destruction of Jerusalem.
 - 2. Jesus predicted this would be a precursor to His judgment against Jerusalem.
 - a. **Matthew 24:6-7** “You are going to hear of wars and rumors of wars...For nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.”
 - 3. As the Romans attacked Israel in the north and made their way south to Jerusalem, there were severe military conflicts in Israel: 20,000 Jews were killed in a conflict in Caesarea. 50,000 Jews were killed in a conflict in Alexandria. 10,000 Jews were killed in a conflict in Damascus. 13,000 Jews were killed in a conflict in Scythopolis. 50,000 Jews were

¹ Reasons why this could be Christ: He rides a white a horse, and Christ rides a white horse in Reve 19:11-16. He carries a bow, and God is depicted as a carrying a bow as He executes judgment in the OT (Hab 3:9, 11). He wears a crown, and Christ is depicted as wearing a crown in Rev 14:14; 19:11-13. He went out as a conqueror, and Rev 5:5 says that Christ “conquered so that he is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”

killed in a conflict in Seleucia. Gary Demar, Last Days Madness, p. 52-53.

4. So the second horseman represents the terrible bloodshed that would lead up to and include the destruction of Jerusalem.

3. The third seal.

i. **Revelation 6:5-6** 5 When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and there was a black horse. Its rider held a set of scales in his hand. 6 Then I heard something like a voice among the four living creatures say, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, but do not harm the oil and the wine."

ii. Overview:

1. Third horse. Black horse. Rider holding a set of scales. Rider calls out the price of wheat and barley.

iii. Interpretation:

1. Symbol of deadly famine that came with the war against Rome.
2. The rider is black because black is associated with famine in the Bible (Lam 5:10).
3. The rider is holding scales, showing that the price of food will be drastically inflated. A denarius was one day's wage. So it cost an entire day's wage to buy just a little wheat. The same amount could get you a little more barley, because barley was cheaper. This was a 1000% increase in the normal cost (Chilton).
4. While wheat and barley would become scarce, wine and oil would not. You can survive without wine and oil, but even if you have all the wine and oil in the world, you cannot survive without wheat and barley. So the point is that during the famine there will be plenty of the things you can live without, but not enough of the things you can't live without.
5. All of this was fulfilled when Rome besieged Jerusalem near the end. They cut off the city's food and water supply, which led to a severe famine, killing thousands. There is one report of a woman who cooked and ate her own child.
6. **Josephus** "Then did the famine widen its progress, and devoured the people by whole houses and families; the upper rooms were full of women and children that were dying by famine; and the lanes of the city were full of the dead bodies of the aged; the children also and the young men wandered about the marketplaces like shadows, all swelled with the famine, and fell down dead whenever their misery seized them."

4. The fourth seal.

- i. **Revelation 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 there was a pale green horse. Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following after him. They were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill by the sword, by famine, by plague, and by the wild animals of the earth.
- ii. Overview:
 - 1. The fourth horse is a green horse, representing death and Hades. It was given authority to kill a fourth of the earth.
- iii. Interpretation:
 - 1. The fourth horseman represents all of the death that will be caused by the preceding horsemen in the time leading up to and including the final destruction of Jerusalem.
 - 2. The fourth horseman is given a name – Death. The Greek word is *Thanatos*, which is where the name of the Marvel supervillain, Thanos, comes from.
 - 3. Remember the word “earth” is the Greek word *ge*, and it can be translated “land,” such as the land of Israel. So this seal is saying that 1/3 of the population of Israel will die, not 1/3 of the entire world.
 - 4. Four means of death are mentioned: sword, famine, plague, and wild animals.
 - a. Remember that I said that John’s writing closely resembles the judgment prophecies of the OT? This is the first example. In Eze 14:21, Ezekiel prophesied about the impending destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, and he references the same sources of death.
 - b. **Ezekiel 14:21** “For this is what the Lord GOD says: How much worse will it be when I send my four devastating judgments against Jerusalem—sword, famine, dangerous animals, and plague—in order to wipe out both people and animals from it!”
 - c. Just as God used these four sources of death to punish Jerusalem by the Babylonians, He would use the same to punish Jerusalem by the Romans in the first century.
 - 5. Hades is the place where unbelievers go after death. It is a place of torment, but it is not the final place of torment, known as hell, which is where unbelievers will be sent after the final judgment when Jesus comes back. The unbelieving Jews won’t just die, they will go to Hades to be tormented.
 - 6. All of these were predicted by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse when He prophesied Jerusalem’s impending destruction, and all of it was fulfilled in destruction of Israel in AD 70.

- a. **Matthew 23:35-37** “35 So all the righteous blood shed on the earth will be charged to you, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Truly I tell you, all these things will come on this generation.”

5. The fifth seal.

- i. **Revelation 6:9-11** 9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered because of the word of God and the testimony they had given. 10 They cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, the one who is holy and true, how long until you judge those who live on the earth and avenge our blood?” 11 So they were each given a white robe, and they were told to rest a little while longer until the number would be completed of their fellow servants and their brothers and sisters, who were going to be killed just as they had been.
- ii. Overview:
 - 1. Jesus opens the fifth seal. John sees a vision of the souls of Christian martyrs under the altar. The martyrs cried out for justice against their oppressors. The martyrs were given a white robe and told to rest just a little while longer until the full number of martyrs had been killed.
- iii. Interpretation:
 - 1. We are given a short break in the action and destruction to remind us of the why. Why all the destruction against Israel? Because they had killed God’s prophets and messengers and servants, including Jesus and the twelve apostles.
 - 2. Why are they crying out for vengeance when vengeance has just been described by the four horsemen? So far, John has just seen visions of what will happen to covenant-breaking Israel. It had not happened yet. So, the martyrs in heaven are crying out for vengeance.
 - 3. Why were their souls under the altar? The image comes from the Old Testament sacrifice in which the priest would pour the blood of the sacrifice at the base of the altar (Lev 4:7). These same priests who were supposed to be offering pleasing sacrifices to God were instead sacrificing God’s own people, the followers of Jesus.
 - 4. They were given white robes, a symbol of victory. When a Roman victory was celebrated in Rome, all the citizens wore white. The city was called the city in white. By giving them white robes Jesus was assuring them that they would see victory over their enemies.
 - 5. They were told to wait until all the martyrs had died. This doesn’t mean all the martyrs throughout history, but the certain number of

Christian martyrs in the first century that needed to die before God would pour out His wrath on Israel.

6. The sixth seal.

- i. **Revelation 6:12-17** 12 Then I saw him open the sixth seal. A violent earthquake occurred; the sun turned black like sackcloth made of hair; the entire moon became like blood; 13 the stars of heaven fell to the earth as a fig tree drops its unripe figs when shaken by a high wind; 14 the sky was split apart like a scroll being rolled up; and every mountain and island was moved from its place. 15 Then the kings of the earth, the nobles, the generals, the rich, the powerful, and every slave and free person hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. 16 And they said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, 17 because the great day of their wrath has come! And who is able to stand?"
- ii. Overview:
 1. The sixth seal is opened. Then John sees what theologians call de-creation: earthquake, the sun turns black, the moon turns red, the stars fall, the sky is split apart, all the mountains and islands are uprooted. All the people of the earth (land) hide from God's wrath.
- iii. Interpretation:
 1. This is where a comparison of John's language in Revelation with the judgment language of the OT prophets is very helpful. The language of de-creation is used by the OT prophets to describe the destruction and overthrow of a nation.
 2. **Douglas Wilson** "It would be easy to place these events at the end of the world – since only the end of the world, we think, would have enough room for a disaster this size. But we tend to think this way because we do not let the Scriptures instruct us how disaster symbolism works."
 3. Examples of "disaster symbolism" in the OT:
 - a. In Isaiah 13, Isaiah prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, which occurred in 586 BC. Notice the language he uses.
 - i. It is described as the day of the Lord's coming. Is 13:9
 - ii. He will make the earth a desolation. Is 13:9
 - iii. The stars of the sky and its constellations will not give their light. Is 13:10
 - iv. The sun will be dark, and the moon will not shine. Is 13:10
 - v. The heavens will tremble. Is 13:10

- vi. The earth will shake from its foundations at the wrath of the Lord. Is 13:13
 - b. In Ezekiel 32:7-8, Ezekiel prophesied the destruction of Egypt at the hands of the Babylon.
 - i. God will cover the heavens and darken the stars.
 - ii. God will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon will not give its light.
 - c. We something very similar in the language of Habakkuk as he prophesied Jerusalem's destruction at the hands of Babylon in Hab 3:16; 1:5-17). When God comes in judgment...
 - i. Light rays flash from his hand. 3:4
 - ii. Plague goes before him, and pestilence follows in his steps. 3:5
 - iii. He shakes the earth. 3:6
 - iv. The mountains break apart; the hills sink down. 3:6
 - v. The mountains shudder. 3:10
 - vi. Sun and moon stand still. 3:11
- 4. This is very similar to the language that Jesus used in the Olivet Discourse to describe the destruction of Israel.
 - a. **Matthew 24:29** "Immediately after the distress of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not shed its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken."
 - b. Jesus was not speaking literally; He was not talking about the end of the world. He was talking about the destruction of Israel in AD 70. We know this because just a few verses later (v. 34), He said that this would occur in that generation.
 - i. **Matthew 24:34** "Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things take place."
- 5. The point is that John is writing symbolically of the destruction of Jerusalem in the first century; the annihilation of a nation. The OT prophets repeatedly used the language of de-creation to describe the destruction of a kingdom. Jesus used the same language to describe the destruction of Jerusalem. In the same way, in the sixth seal John is seeing a vision of de-creation – the total destruction of the Jewish nation.
- 6. As further proof that John is writing symbolically of the overthrow of the Jewish nation, notice his use of the number seven, which stands for completion.

- a. He describes the de-creation of seven things: earth, sun, moon, stars, sky, land, and mankind.
- b. He describes seven different kinds of people: kings, nobles, generals, the rich, the powerful, slaves, and free people.
- c. In other words, he is symbolically portraying the complete destruction of Israel in the first century.

III. CONCLUSION

1. When you remember that...
 - i. Revelation is a prophecy that was to be fulfilled soon after its writing,
 - ii. and that the theme is the punishment of Israel for murdering Christ and His servants,
 - iii. and when you compare John's language to the "disaster symbolism" used by the OT prophets,
 - iv. ...it is much easier to see that the four horsemen of the apocalypse and the six seals represent the great tribulation that was to come upon Israel in the first century, and not the destruction of the whole world thousands of years later.