

Living Word Fellowship Church

An Expository Explanation of Revelation Chapter 6

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A. General Description:

The identity of the first horse will in large part be determined by the identification of the following three. The second horse and its rider are said to take peace from the earth, and this, with the words slay and sword, indicates war. The third horse and its rider surely represent scarcity of food, though not altogether a famine. The fourth horse and its rider, more dreadful than any of the others, bear the very name Death. To them was given authority over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with famine, and with death, and by the wild beasts of the earth (ASV).¹

Note that in these first four scenes there are no names of individuals, human or superhuman, no geographical terms, and no specific events. The judgments are, as it were, of a general nature: wars have occurred often on earth, and they are often accompanied by pestilence and by scarcity of food, if not famine conditions. This would seem to be, then, just a preliminary phase of the more terrible judgments to follow.²

B. Background Information:

1. The imagery is adapted from the angelic horsemen sent by God to patrol the earth in Zechariah 1:8–11 and 6:1–8, though used in a different way. (Some scholars suggest that the horsemen portray angels of judgment, others symbols for Christ coming in judgments, and still others simply symbols for judgments in general.)³
2. A document could not be opened until all the seals were broken (i.e., in Revelation, after 8:1); the seals (in this case judgments) witness the validity of the document's contents. (Perhaps, as in the Old Testament covenant, heaven and earth are called to witness; cf. Deut 30:19; Ps 50:4.)⁴
3. The very image of an archer on a white horse would strike terror into the heart of a pro-Roman reader. The only mounted archers of antiquity were the Parthians, whose tactics and skills had made them Rome's most feared enemies; old Persian armies, whose heirs the Parthians were, always included sacred white horses. Although the Old Testament uses the "bow" as a symbol of judgment by battle more generally, Roman readers would think of this eastern nation that had defeated them in some recent wars; Parthians' skill as archers was common knowledge.⁵
4. The "sword" was often a symbol of judgment by war in the Old Testament and later literature, and red was the color most associated with war and bloodshed (hence the "red planet" is named Mars for the Roman god of war). The bloody unrest of A.D. 68–69, when three emperors were successively killed, would have been one illustration of the principle here.⁶
5. The "scales" indicate rationing, or at least the caution of merchants to get every cent the food is worth. Barley and wheat were basic staples. Even then, three quarts of barley was hardly enough daily food for a whole family to subsist on; in the many peasant families with large numbers of children,

¹ Pfeiffer, C. F., & Harrison, E. F., eds. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Re 6:1). Moody Press.

² Pfeiffer, C. F., & Harrison, E. F., eds. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Re 6:1). Moody Press.

³ Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Re 6:1–8). InterVarsity Press.

⁴ Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Re 6:1). InterVarsity Press.

⁵ Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Re 6:2). InterVarsity Press.

⁶ Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Re 6:3–4). InterVarsity Press.

several children would die. The famine also created a high inflation rate: this wheat costs more than ten times the average price of wheat.⁷

6. The very fact of their shed blood (6:9) cries out for the vindication of retribution (Gen 4:10; see comment on Mt 23:35); as in the Old Testament, a prayer for vengeance for corporate sin was ultimately a prayer for the vindication of the righteous and of God's name. Justice could ultimately be done, and the oppressed delivered, only when God arose to judge the earth. "How long?" was common in Old Testament prayers of entreaty (e.g., Ps 6:3; 13:1; 80:4), including prayers for vindication (e.g., Ps 79:5, 10; Zech 1:12); it also could address the duration of a judgment (Is 6:11; Jer 47:6).⁸
7. An Old Testament prophecy associated the end of the age with a powerful earthquake (Zech 14:4–5; cf. Ezek 38:20; Amos 8:8); because severe earthquakes had wrought devastation in first-century Asia Minor, this announcement would have special impact on the readers. Darkness was also an Old Testament judgment (Ex 10:21–23; Is 50:3), especially the judgment of the end (Is 13:9–10; 24:23; Ezek 32:7–8; Amos 5:18; 8:9; cf. 4 Ezra). The stars may symbolize angelic hosts (12:4; Is 24:21; Dan 8:10; 10:13), but in this context they probably depict simply the cosmic scope of the judgment (Is 34:4).⁹
8. The Old Testament and apocalypses also speak of judgment across social classes; the readers could be encouraged that God would ultimately vindicate them against the emperor and his governors who now judged them. Hiding in the rocks and crying for the mountains to conceal them from God's wrath reflects Hosea 10:8; cf. Isaiah 2:10 and 19–20.¹⁰

c. Key Words and Apocalyptic Definitions:

1. The seven seals:

- a) The breaking of the first seal marks the coming of the antichrist, the "little horn" of Daniel 7:8 or the "man of lawlessness" of 2 Thessalonians 2:3.The figures of riders and horses form a stark contrast with Christ on a white horse in Revelation 19:11–16.¹¹
- b) **This is the horse of war.** The breaking of the second seal marks the removal of peace from the earth. The red color of the horse suggests bloodshed, and the "mighty sword" (6:4) confirms it.¹²
- c) **This is the horse of famine.** There is a cause and effect relationship between the taking of peace at the breaking of the second seal and the increase of famine and inflation after the third seal is broken. The "pair of scales" (6:5) symbolizes the coming inflation and famine. A "day's pay" (6:6; "denarius," NASB; "penny," KJV) is literally "a denarius," which was a Roman monetary unit worth approximately one day's wage.¹³
- d) **Death results from war and famine.** Ezekiel 14:21 is quoted in 6:8. These four seals are separated from the last three. They are preliminary to the opening of the scroll's contents. The fourth seal reveals an ashen or yellowish-green horse that carries the horseman "Death," resulting in the destruction of one-fourth of the earth's population. Being eaten by wild beasts was one of the curses of the Mosaic covenant (Deut. 28:26).¹⁴
- e) **The fifth seal is now opened.** The location is the temple in heaven (cf. Hab. 2:20). At the opening of this fifth seal the souls of martyred saints are revealed. They represent those who were slain for their faith. Their location under the altar shows that they are seen as a sacrifice.¹⁵

⁷ Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Re 6:5–6). InterVarsity Press.

⁸ Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Re 6:10). InterVarsity Press.

⁹ Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Re 6:12–13). InterVarsity Press.

¹⁰ Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Re 6:15–16). InterVarsity Press.

¹¹ Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). *Tyndale concise Bible commentary* (p. 741). Tyndale House Publishers.

¹² Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). *Tyndale concise Bible commentary* (p. 741). Tyndale House Publishers.

¹³ Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). *Tyndale concise Bible commentary* (p. 741). Tyndale House Publishers.

¹⁴ Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). *Tyndale concise Bible commentary* (p. 741). Tyndale House Publishers.

¹⁵ Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). *Tyndale concise Bible commentary* (pp. 741–742). Tyndale House Publishers.

f) The phrase “the people who belong to this world” refers to those who are against God (6:10; cf. 11:10; 13:8, 12; 17:2, 8; 3:10; 8:13). After the devastation accompanied by the first four horsemen (seals 1–4), the martyrs are revealed praying for God’s vengeance (seal 5).¹⁶

g) **The sixth seal** begins the vengeance requested by the martyred saints.¹⁷

- When these events are lined up with Matthew 24:29 we learn that this seal represents a time immediately after the tribulation period. The time of the second coming of Christ (Matthew 24:30-31).
- The breaking of the sixth seal unleashes universal havoc in the heavens and on earth (6:12–7:17). These cosmic disturbances characterize the day of the Lord and are predicted in Isaiah 34:4, Joel 2:30–31, and Matthew 24:29. The imagery used in these verses is from Joel 2:28–32. For the earthquake, see 8:10; 9:1; and Matthew 24:29.¹⁸

D. Chapter conclusion (information quoted – do not remember where I got it from):

1. **6:15-17.** The practical effect of the judgment was fear in unbelievers from all walks of life. They called on **the mountains and the rocks to fall on** them and to **hide** them from God’s **wrath**. Their fear was so great they would rather be killed by a falling mountain than to face the wrath of the Lamb and Their wrath, referring to the anger of the Triune God. Again, this is not a picture of ordinary trouble but the period of greatest distress in world history.
2. **Taken as a whole, chapter 6 is one of the most important and pivotal chapters in the entire book.** It describes the first six seals and also introduces the seventh seal which consists of and introduces the seven trumpets and the seven bowls of the wrath of God in chapters 8-9; 16.
3. The contents of chapter 6 should put to rest the false teachings that God, being a God of love, could not judge a wicked world. It also raises the important question contained in the closing words of verse 17: **Who can stand?** Only those who have availed themselves of the grace of God before the time of judgment will be able to stand when God deals with the earth in this final period of great distress. Those who will be saved in the Great Tribulation are described in the next chapter.

¹⁶ Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). *Tyndale concise Bible commentary* (pp. 741–742). Tyndale House Publishers.

¹⁷ Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). *Tyndale concise Bible commentary* (pp. 741–742). Tyndale House Publishers.

¹⁸ Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). *Tyndale concise Bible commentary* (p. 742). Tyndale House Publishers.

Revelation

Focus	<i>“Things Which You Have Seen”</i> 1:1 1:20		<i>“Things Which Are”</i> 2:1 3:22		<i>“Things Which Will Take Place”</i> 4:1 22:21								
<i>Divisions</i>	<i>The Lord Jesus Christ</i>		<i>The Seven Churches</i>		<i>The Judge</i>	<i>The Tribulation</i>		<i>The Second Coming</i>		<i>The Millennium</i>		<i>The Eternal State</i>	
<i>Topics</i>	<i>Vision of Christ</i>				<i>Vision of Consummation</i>								
	<i>Theophany</i>		<i>Talks</i>		<i>Tribuations</i>		<i>Trumpets</i>		<i>Together</i>				
<i>Place</i>	<i>Written on the Island of Patmos</i>												
<i>Time</i>	<i>C. A.D. 95-96</i>												