

Lesson 16

Last week we began looking at Chapter 6, in which the seven seals on the scroll begin to come off one by one, revealing the four horses of the apocalypse.

With the first seal, we saw a Parthian soldier mounted on a white horse and holding a bow. And we discussed the irrational fear that Rome had when it came to Parthia, the great military power on their eastern border.

With the second seal, we saw the red horse of war that would take away the famous Roman peace.

The third horse appears in verse 5.

Revelation 6:5-6

5 And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. 6 And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.

When the third seal is removed, a black horse is released. This horse represents famine and economic hardship.

The balance in the rider's hand was for weighing food. Its presence here reminds us of Ezekiel 4.

Ezekiel 4:16 — Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, behold, I will break the staff of bread in Jerusalem: and they shall eat bread by weight, and with care; and they shall drink water by measure, and with astonishment.

Ezekiel says that the people would eat bread by weight and with fearfulness. And in Leviticus 26:26, God told the people that if they were disobedient, then “they shall deliver you your bread again by weight.”

We know from Matthew 20:2 that the penny or a denarius in verse 6 was a day’s wages. Normally at this time it would have bought ten times as much food as it buys in these verses.

We see famine in these verses, but this famine is not yet as bad as it could be. How do we know that? Because, although expensive, wheat and barley are still available. And also because the rider is commanded not to hurt the oil or the wine. This famine was not too extreme **yet**, with “yet” being the key term. As with the plagues of Egypt, the worst plagues against Rome will be saved for the end.

It was not uncommon for there to be wine and oil but little or no grain. The olive tree and the grape vine are more deeply rooted than grain and would endure a drought that would wipe out the other. Remember that when Jacob sent his sons to Egypt for corn, he was still able to send with them “the best fruits in the land” (Genesis 43:11). What we see here is a situation in which luxuries are plentiful while necessities are scarce.

Once again we can find a historical comparison with Rome. During the time of **Nero** there had been a famine that left the luxuries untouched. During that famine, when a ship arrived from Alexandria, the starving populace of the city rioted when they discovered that the ship contained **not corn** as they expected but **sand** to cover the ground for the gladiatorial games.

Later, during the reign of **Domitian**, there was such a shortage of grain and such an overabundance of wine that Domitian ordered half the vineyards to be cut down. The violent reaction that followed caused the order to be rescinded.

Why is this rider told not to do too much damage? Why is this rider being restrained? The answer is that these judgments are still at an early stage. We are only in Chapter 6! Things will get much worse later when the bowls are poured out. Even here, during the judgment itself, we are continuing to see the patience and longsuffering of God.

Yes, God is patient and longsuffering — but God is not mocked. Judgment is coming. For now there is still time to repent. Later there will be no time for repentance.

Revelation 6:7-8

7 And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. 8 And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

With the removal of the fourth seal, the pale horse takes the stage, and perhaps most frightening of all is this final pale horse of pestilence. The Greek word translated “pale” is *chloros*, which means yellow-green. The rider of this horse is named Death, and hell or Hades follows along with him.

If this judgment is not yet too extreme, Rome should shudder to think of what is coming!

Verse 8 says that power was given to them to kill a quarter of the people of the earth “with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth” (ESV).

Who gets this power? Who is being identified by the word “them” in verse 8?

Some say that all the four horses from the first four seals are in view here, and they base that view on the fact that these powers in verse 8 have some overlap with the first three horses. But the overlap is certainly not exact. And I don’t think we have to conclude that this fourth seal is referring back somehow to the first three seals.

A better view is that the group labeled “them” in verse 8 is the group we see earlier in that same verse — the rider named Death on the pale horse along with Hades who follows close behind. They are the natural antecedent of the pronoun “them.”

These four powers to kill remind us of Ezekiel 14:12-23, which describes a judgment against Jerusalem by referring to sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts as God’s four deadly acts of judgment. They also remind us of Leviticus

26:21-26 where God tells his people the penalties for their disobedience — wild beasts, sword, pestilence, and famine.

What we are seeing in these verses are traditional images used by God to describe what happens when he focuses his wrath upon those who are opposed to him.

Rome thought it had the power of sword, and in fact it did to an extent. Paul had written a few decades earlier that the Roman officials “beareth not the sword in vain” (Romans 13:4). But Rome was not using that sword as God had intended for it to use it; instead, Rome had turned that sword against the people of God (including Paul himself), and so God would now turn that sword against Rome.

Rome would also suffer death by famine, which reminds us of the third horse. It did not take very long for that limited famine to become much worse. In this fourth seal, people are not just suffering from lack of food — they are **dying** from lack of food.

We are also told in verse 8 that Rome would also suffer death by pestilence or disease. Where the KJV has the word “death” in verse 8, the ESV had the word “pestilence.” Which is correct?

The Greek word used here is *thanatos*, which means death — but most likely what is meant here is **disease** rather than death — why?

First, the verse itself says that the rider was to **kill with *thanatos***. If *thanatos* means death here, then the rider is being told to kill people with death, which is an odd usage of the word death.

Second, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible several times used the Greek word *thanatos* to translate the Hebrew word for pestilence or disease. That usage confirms that *thanatos* can mean disease rather than death, which I think is the case here.

The fourth type of death brought by the rider on the pale horse is death by beasts. As with the sword, this was a type of death that Rome enjoyed inflicting on Christians. God is going to turn things around against Rome.

Notice in these verses that death and Hades are being sent forth and commanded by God. All throughout this book of Revelation, both death and Hades are regarded as defeated enemies who must do whatever the Lamb bids.

2 Timothy 1:10 — *But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abol-*

ished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Christ controls death, whereas the Roman emperors were controlled by death. Jesus conquered death, whereas death conquered Caesar.

Why do only a quarter of the people of the earth perish in verse 8? As with everything else we are seeing here, this is not a literal quarter of the earth's population. As with the prior seal, what we are seeing here is a figure showing that this initial judgment is neither final nor complete. The survivors will live to experience much worse. This terrible plague is just the warm-up act!

Revelation 6:9-11

9 And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: 10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? 11 And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.

With the fifth seal, the focus moves from the **enemies** of God back to the **people** of God. We see an altar, and under the altar we see the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. God is keeping them safe from the judgments unleashed below.

What is the identity of the altar in verse 9? The theme of sacrifice suggests it may be the altar of burnt offering. But the prayers that rise like incense suggest it might depict the altar of incense. Most likely it is intended to be a blending of those two altars.

This altar in heaven reminds us of Hebrews 8-9, where we learn that the earthly tabernacle of the Old Testament was constructed according to a heavenly pattern. It should be a reminder to us that we still live and worship according to a heavenly pattern.

***Hebrews 9:23** — It was therefore necessary that the patterns of things in the heavens should be purified with these; but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.*

The witness or testimony for which these souls had been martyred was the testimony of Jesus. This same testimony was mentioned in 1:2, and we will see it again in 12:17, 14:12, and 19:10. Jesus had told his disciples what to expect in John 16:2 — “whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.” And in Matthew 24:9, Jesus told his followers that they would be “hated of all nations for my name’s sake.”

Notice that these martyrs are beneath the altar. We are reminded at once of Leviticus 4.

***Leviticus 4:7** — And the priest shall put some of the blood upon the horns of the altar of sweet incense before the Lord, which is in the tabernacle of the congregation; and shall pour all the blood of the bullock **at the bottom of the altar of the burnt offering**, which is at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation.*

The life blood of these Christians has been poured out as a sacrifice to God. We see the same image from the pen of Paul.

***Philippians 2:17** — Yea, and if I be **offered upon the sacrifice** and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all.*

***2 Timothy 4:6** — For I am now **ready to be offered**, and the time of my departure is at hand.*

I like what Barclay said on these verses:

There is a great and uplifting truth here. When a good man dies for the sake of goodness, it may look like tragedy, like the waste of a fine life; like the work of evil men; and, indeed, it may be all these things. But every life laid down for right and truth and

God is ultimately more than any of these things—it is an offering made to God.

Where are the dead in Christ today? Some say that they are with **Abraham** (as we know the righteous were prior to the cross), while others (myself included) say that they are with **Christ**. Without wading into that discussion here, we should note that the dead in Christ in verse 9 are shown in heaven with God and Christ. (Revelation 8:3 and 9:13 will describe the golden altar as being before the throne and before God.)

Remember that by the time of this book, the Apostle Paul was one of these martyrs. What had Paul said by inspiration about where he expected to go when he died?

***Philippians 1:23** — For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.*

***2 Corinthians 5:8** — We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.*

I think Paul was right — he went to be with Jesus. After all, what would have prevented him? Aren't we told that we can boldly approach the throne of grace? (Hebrews 4:16). I think what we are seeing right here confirms Paul's inspired expectation.

Verse 10 is one of the most important verses in this book. Why? Because verse 10 explains how we got here. It explains why we have this book.

“How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” **The entire book of Revelation is a response to that question!** Verse 10 is the eternal cry of the suffering righteous — **how long?** The book of Revelation is the answer from God to that plea from his people for divine retribution. **And what is God's answer?**

- **How long, O Lord?** It must shortly come to pass (1:1).
- **How long, O Lord?** The time is at hand (1:3).
- **How long, O Lord?** There will be no more waiting (10:5) [ASV].
- **How long, O Lord?** It must shortly be done (22:6).
- **How long, O Lord?** The time is at hand (22:10).
- **How long, O Lord?** Quickly (22:12).

- **How long, O Lord?** Quickly (22:20).

How long? According to most modern commentaries, the answer to that question is at least two thousand years and counting. **Is that the answer we just read from the Bible?** Is that the answer that we just read **seven times** from this very book?

Could the **inspired** answer to the question “how long?” be any more clear? **We need to be very suspicious of any view of this book that gives a different answer to the question in verse 10!**

What support is there for stating that nothing in the book has been fulfilled yet? Is that what an initial reader would have thought? Is that the answer they would have expected to the question in verse 10? **No, and it is not the answer they got!** They were told over and over again that the time was near and that the judgments in this book would come quickly.

The question in verse 10 reminds us of Psalm 79.

Psalm 79:5-10 — How long, Lord? wilt thou be angry for ever? shall thy jealousy burn like fire? Pour out thy wrath upon the heathen that have not known thee, and upon the kingdoms that have not called upon thy name. For they have devoured Jacob, and laid waste his dwelling place. ... 10 Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is their God? let him be known among the heathen in our sight by the revenging of the blood of thy servants which is shed.

And yet, in verse 11 the martyrs are told to “rest yet for a little season,” that is, they are told to rest a little longer. God had a plan, and they needed to wait until the time was right for their vindication, but that time would be soon! They would have to wait only a little longer. God’s judgment was at the doorstep.

For a short time, Rome was to have a position of power over God’s people. But during that time, Rome was only digging its own grave. Recall Isaiah 33:1 where God told Assyria, “when thou shalt cease to spoil, thou shalt be spoiled; and when thou shalt make an end to deal treacherously, they shall deal treacherously with thee.” In short, God said to them, “when you have finished destroying, I will destroy you.” God has that same message for Rome. Their time is almost up!

But none of this should have been surprising. Daniel had said the same thing 600 years earlier. In Daniel 2, Daniel prophesied that God's eternal kingdom would conquer Rome, and, in Daniel 11, Daniel wrote that the king of the North (which was Rome) would prosper then be destroyed. We see those same prophecies in the book of Revelation, but here they are much closer to their fulfillment.

Who are those that "dwell on the earth" in verse 10? We have seen that group before. That phrase is the standard description in Revelation for those who are hostile to God. Those on God's side are usually pictured in this book as already dwelling in heaven even though they are still alive on earth. And there is a great lesson for us in that description of God's people. We are pilgrims! This world is not our home! We are just passing through! Isn't that what Paul told us?

***Colossians 3:3** — For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.*

***Philippians 3:20** — For our citizenship is in heaven.*
[ASV]

What is meant by the closing phrase in verses 11 — that the martyrs should wait "until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled"?

It means that, although the judgment of Rome was coming soon, it would **not** happen immediately. **Why not?** Because certain prophecies had to be fulfilled first.

In John 10:35, Jesus told us that "the scripture cannot be broken." What that means is that if God has prophesied that a certain event will occur, then not only can we see that event **will occur**, but we can say that event **must occur**. What that means is that Rome cannot be taken out of the way now if prophecies tell us that Rome still has a part to play that has not yet been fulfilled — which, although not the case today, was the case at the time this vision was being seen by John in the first century. In fact, we studied prophecies about Rome from the book of Daniel that had not happened yet as of the the date of this vision in Chapter 6.

Paul made the same point in writing about the man of perdition (whom I believe is the Emperor Domitian).

***2 Thessalonians 2:3-6** — Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there*

*come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? **And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time.***

Domitian had been prophesied by Daniel long before the rise of the Roman empire. Those prophesies had to be fulfilled before God could act in judgment against Rome or (as Paul told the Thessalonians) before Christ could return at the end of the world. Paul told us that Domitian would be “revealed in his time,” and the judgment of Rome would also occur according to God’s timetable. Domitian had not yet become emperor when this book was written. His father, Vespasian, was still on the throne, and his other son, Titus, would precede Domitian as emperor.

Rome was filling out its own death warrant with each Christian it killed. When the warrant was completed, the judgment would follow. God controls the time schedule here, not Rome.

Notice that the cry for vindication from these martyrs rises from their own blood. It makes us think of Genesis 4:10 — “the voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground.” The blood of the martyrs could not go unanswered. There was a moral necessity for judgment and for retribution — and judgment and retribution were coming soon.

Some suggest that such a cry should never be voiced by a Christian. How can we love our enemies while asking God to judge them and avenge ourselves?

First, we see such a cry in verse 10, and we see God’s response in this book. God answers that cry and judges the enemies of his people, avenging their blood.

Second, we see God’s longsuffering patience even in those judgments, and so we too can pray that God will judge our enemies, and yet while doing so give them a final opportunity to repent.

Third, the Bible is filled with pleas from his people for divine vindication:

Psalm 79:10 — *Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is their God? let him be known among the*

heathen in our sight by the revenging of the blood of thy servants which is shed.

Psalm 94:3 — Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph?

It is not wrong for a Christian to pray for vindication from evil men. God's response in this book, if nothing else, should convince us of that!

Can we pray for the judgment of God's enemies today? Can we pray for the casting down of imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God? Absolutely! Not only **can** we pray for such things, we **must** pray for such things!

We are at war! And it is no sin to pray that your enemies be defeated when you are at war against them!

Revelation 6:12-17

12 And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; 13 And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. 14 And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. 15 And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; 16 And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the

throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: 17 For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?

The removal of the sixth seal reveals the wrath of the Lamb and the judgment of the ungodly.

Does this seal describe the **final judgment** and the end of time? Most commentators say that it does, but in studying Revelation I am always reminded of something Mark Twain once said — **when you find yourself on the side of the majority, it's probably time to change sides!**

The language in verses 12-17 is language of judgment, and as language of judgment it **could** be used to describe many different judgments, including the great and final judgment at the end of the world. But is that the judgment that is being described here?

What is the context? What is the time frame? Which judgment is under consideration here? **If we ever stop asking ourselves those question in our study of this book, then we will almost certainly go off the rails in our interpretation, as so many others have done.**

People treat this book like a cafeteria line in which the reader can select verses they like and then use them for whatever purpose they want — and then those same people wonder why the book is so hard to understand! This book is much easier to understand than they think it is!

Remember one of our key interpretive principles — **similarity of language does not prove identity of subject.** There are many judgments in the Bible, and they are often described with the same symbols and the same images.

Matthew 24:30, for example, sure sounds a lot like the end of the world when considered alone and apart from its context and its time frame. But when we consider the time frame (verse 34 — first century) and the context (a discussion of the temple in Jerusalem), we see that Matthew 24:30 is **not** describing the end of the world but is instead describing the end of Jerusalem in AD 70. We likewise need to be careful in our interpretation of these verses in Revelation 6. As one commentator reminds us:

We must take the trouble to learn as much as possible concerning the historical situation to which the book of Revelation be-

longs. It is only when this historical situation is reconstructed that Revelation comes alive and we are able to enter sympathetically into the mind and heart of the author and his readers. Perhaps no other book of the Bible has suffered more from being wrenched from its historical context than has Revelation.

The language used to describe the opening of the sixth seal is a mosaic of phrases used elsewhere in the Bible to describe other past judgments by God.

What about the great earthquake in verse 12? Read Luke 21 about the judgment against Jerusalem in AD 70:

*Luke 21:11 — And **great earthquakes** shall be in divers places, and famines, and pestilences; and fearful sights and great signs shall there be from heaven.*

And read Isaiah 29 about another even earlier judgment against Jerusalem:

*Isaiah 29:6 — Thou shalt be visited of the Lord of hosts with thunder, **and with earthquake**, and great noise, with storm and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire.*

What about the darkening of the sun and the moon in verse 12? Read Joel 2, which Acts 2 tells us was fulfilled in the first century:

Joel 2:31 — The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and the terrible day of the Lord come.

What about the falling of the stars and the removing of the heavens in verses 13-14? Read Isaiah 34 about a judgment against Edom:

Isaiah 34:4 — And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig tree.

And read Isaiah 13 about a judgment against Babylon carried out by God through the Medes:

*Isaiah 13:13 — Therefore I will **shake the heavens**, and the earth shall remove out of her place, in the*

wrath of the Lord of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger.

And read Matthew 24 about a judgment against Jerusalem in the first century:

Matthew 24:29 — *Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and **the stars shall fall from heaven**, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken.*

What about the movement of islands and mountains out of their places in verse 14? Read Haggai 2 about the judgment against Jerusalem **and** the establishment of the eternal kingdom in the first century:

Haggai 2:6 — *For thus saith the Lord of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and **I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land.***

Read Nahum 1 about a judgment against Nineveh:

Nahum 1:5 — ***The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt**, and the earth is burned at his presence, yea, the world, and all that dwell therein.*

Read Micah 1 about a judgment against Samaria and Jerusalem:

Micah 1:4 — ***And the mountains shall be molten under him**, and the valleys shall be cleft, as wax before the fire, and as the waters that are poured down a steep place.*

Read Isaiah 13 (again) about a judgment against Babylon:

Isaiah 13:13 — *Therefore I will shake the heavens, and **the earth shall remove out of her place**, in the wrath of the Lord of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger.*

So we ask again, **do verses 12-17 from Revelation 6 describe the end of the world?** Many would say that the language used in these verses could only apply to the end of the world. **Tell that to Babylon! Tell that to Edom! Tell that to Nineveh! Tell that to Samaria! Tell that to Jerusalem!** The same vivid language was applied to them regarding events that happened thousands of year ago — **not** the end of the world!

There may be some good arguments for applying these verses to the end of the world, but saying that the language used here could **only** describe the end of the world is **not** a good argument. Why? Because the Bible repeatedly uses the same language to apply to events other than the end of the world.

Our investigation of this language from verses 12-17 provides an **important reminder** — we cannot study Revelation apart from the Old Testament. No other book in the New Testament alludes to the Old Testament more often than does the book of Revelation. As Barclay says:

Strange as John's pictures may seem to us, there is not a single detail which is not ... in the Old Testament.

Symbols are often based on previous **literal** events. Their purpose is to remind one of that earlier event. Israel, for example, is a symbol for God's people, and so Israel and the new Jerusalem are symbols for the church. Likewise, Egypt is a symbol for slavery and bondage. Babylon is a symbol for Rome. The ten plagues are symbols for God's judgments.

But in these verses the sun, the moon, the stars, the sky, and the whole earth are affected. Why do we see such **global terms** used in reference to Rome?

First, of course, the immediate answer is that to the people of this day, Rome was global! It ruled much of the entire known world!

***Luke 2:1** — And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that **all the world** should be taxed.*

Second, whenever the ungodly are dominant and oppressive, the entire world is said to be theirs. Isaiah 13:11 says with regard to Babylon, "I will punish **the world** for their evil." Satan is called "the prince of this world" in John 14:30.

The picture in these verses is of God dismantling and attacking his own created world so that he can judge the ungodly who seem to be in charge of that world. God is letting them know who is really in charge! If they think they can hide, they are badly mistaken. God will dismantle his creation to find them and punish them. That is the picture in these verses, as well as in the many verses we just read describing prior judgments in the Old Testament.

Usually in our study of this book, we should try to see things from **God's** point of view, but here it helps to see things from **Rome's** point of view. The picture here is one of a total and unexpected breakdown of order. Notice from verse 15 that this fear touches all levels of society from the least to the greatest.

Rome thought it had covered every base, but it had forgotten to include God in its plans. And men always find themselves in trouble when they forget to factor God into their equations!

James 4:13-14 — Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

That attitude was Rome's attitude. Rome had great plans for itself, but they were all apart from God. And, as with a human life, the life of mighty Rome would also prove to be a vapor that appears just for a little time.