

The First Four Seal Judgments—the Four Horsemen (Revelation 6:1-8)

So far the book of Revelation has offered a number of interpretive challenges, but the meaning of chapters 1-5 has been relatively straightforward. The visions of heaven and the messages to the seven churches inspire Christian worship and faithfulness. However, beginning with chapter 6 the interpretive challenges escalate. Like an ancient mariner hugging the safety of the coastline but at last setting out into the open sea, studying the book of Revelation begins with some simpler images but eventually turns to what seems like uncharted waters. Thankfully, there are guiding lights along the way. For example, in His Olivet Discourse Jesus predicted many of the same events that surface in the predictive chapters of Revelation. In Matthew 24:4-8 Jesus warned about future “birth pains,” events that would increase in intensity and frequency. These birth pains include false messiahs, warfare, and famine, all of which will lead to death—the same sequence that John reveals in the context of the four horsemen of Revelation 6:1-8.

These four horsemen constitute the first four of seven “seal” judgments that emerge from the sealed scroll of Revelation 5. These seal judgments are followed by seven trumpet judgments and then seven bowl judgments. The future definitely holds a time of worldwide judgment, and that judgment will be fair and just because humankind continues to resist its Creator and Redeemer. One challenge in this book is taking the predictions about the future and applying them to Christian living today. At the outset, however, we can safely conclude that Jesus looks at sin differently than we do and He extends grace more readily than we deserve.

The first Seal Judgment—the Lord Jesus Christ will justly judge the world by releasing political domination on the earth (6:1-2).

Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, alone is worthy to receive from the hand of God the Father the seven-sealed scroll of judgment (Revelation 5:1-5). Having received the scroll, Jesus will open its seven seals and release seven judgments on the earth. While some interpreters see these judgments as taking place in the past or as present realities the tone of the book points to the future. These future judgments are unparalleled in history and in present experience. The first four Seal Judgments take the form of four horsemen, four distinct, global movements that will rain divine wrath on a rebellious world. The first horseman personifies political domination likely resident within a particular world ruler often referred to as the Antichrist.

The Lamb, Jesus Christ, broke open the first seal (6:1).

The scene in John’s vision of God’s throne room was filled with tension as Jesus Christ, the Lamb who is Lord, broke open the first seal of the book of judgment. As He did so John heard one of the four living beings surrounding the throne of God say in a voice like thunder, “Come!” This exhortation may have been directed to the first horseman to come forth and begin his destructive work. However, many ancient manuscripts record this exhortation as “Come and see!” Therefore, it seems likely that the living being was inviting John to step forward and observe what was about to emerge from the scroll. As Christians we are all encouraged to pay attention to the truth of divine judgment as revealed in this book (Revelation 1:3).

A white horse emerged carrying a rider personifying political domination (6:2).

What John saw next was a white horse leaping from the scroll. White usually refers to purity or righteousness, but this horse and its rider seem to be counterfeits to true holiness. Granted, some interpret the rider on this first horse as Jesus Himself and the advance of the gospel in the world. But the other horsemen clearly portray judgment, so consistency would demand that this first horse and rider likewise predict judgment. The one sitting on the white horse had a bow in his hand and a victor's crown on his head. These images speak of conquest, forced domination. The crown "was given" to the rider possibly by the people of the earth in their submission to the rider's rapacious conquest, but more likely by the Lord in His capacity as sovereign over the earth (compare verses 4 and 8). The rider on the white horse is a warrior. He will go out into the world "conquering in order that he might conquer," that is, conquering through a series of battles that will bring about complete domination. While this rider is a personification of political domination, that domination will come by way of a specific individual. Jesus warned about the coming of many false messiahs (Matthew 24:4-5) and Daniel warned about a future ruler whom we often refer to as the Antichrist (Daniel 9:26). By means of this first seal judgment Jesus will justly release on this rebellious world a series of conflicts that will result in political domination under a tyrannical, godless leader who at first will appear to be a savior.

The second Seal Judgment—the Lord Jesus Christ will justly judge the world by releasing global warfare on the earth (6:3-4).

Of course, political domination will require global warfare. The second horseman personifies warfare to the extreme. Jesus predicted the increasing frequency and intensity of warfare prior to His return (Matthew 24:6). The world will certainly witness unparalleled warfare as the end approaches.

The Lamb, Jesus Christ, broke open the second seal (6:3).

John saw the Lamb, Jesus Christ, break open the second seal and he again heard one of the four living beings say "Come and see!" Judgment on the earth was just beginning.

A fiery red horse emerged carrying a rider personifying global warfare (6:4).

A second horse leaped from the scroll, a fiery red horse. Red, the color of fire and blood, often refers to deadly judgment. This horseman was given, apparently by God's sovereign power, the ability to take peace from the earth. The first horseman will establish an enforced peace (compare 1 Thessalonians 5:3), probably involving a treaty in the Middle East (compare Daniel 9:27). However, whatever enforced peace will be put in place will quickly be challenged through extended warfare. The second horseman personifies warfare. He possesses a "great sword" and will incite people to engage in slaughter. Lasting peace apart from Jesus Christ is an elusive chimera. Peace with God and peace with others is possible only through faith in Jesus Christ.

**The third Seal Judgment—the Lord Jesus Christ will justly
judge the world by releasing severe famine on the earth (6:5-6).**

Political domination and global warfare will be followed by a severe and devastating famine as the future unfolds. In Matthew 24:8 Jesus predicted that famines would precede His return. This third seal judgment released by Jesus Christ will shake the world, but regrettably the world won't turn to Jesus for forgiveness and deliverance.

The Lamb, Jesus Christ, broke open the third seal (6:5a).

For the third time Jesus, the Lamb, broke open one of the seals on the scroll of judgment. Again one of the living beings cried out, "Come and see!"

A black horse emerged carrying a rider personifying severe famine (6:5b-6).

John saw a black horse emerge from the scroll. Black often symbolizes sorrow. Here the rider on the black horse would bring great sorrow on the earth through famine. John saw in the hand of the rider on the black horse a set of scales. These scales would be necessary for carefully rationing the meager resources during the course of a future famine. As John looked at this image he heard a voice coming from the middle of the four living beings. This voice could be that of God the Father or of the Lamb, since both were positioned on the throne surrounded by these unusual angelic creatures. However, since John doesn't identify the voice as that of deity it's best to understand this as a mysterious voice from an unidentified source.

The voice added clarity to the image by declaring, "A measure of wheat for a denarius and three measures of barley for a denarius." A "measure" was equivalent to about one quart or one liter. A "denarius" was the standard pay for a soldier or common worker for one day's work. Wheat is a more nutritious grain than barley, so although the ration of barley would be more filling it would not necessarily be more nutritious. Either amount would constitute roughly one day's needs for one person. In other words, when this future famine occurs it will take a whole day's pay to feed one person for one day. Families will suffer greatly as they try to share such limited resources. In that day hunger will prevail.

The mysterious voice from the middle of the four living beings also added, "Do not harm the oil and the wine." Many commentators take this to mean that such luxury items as olive oil and wine will still be available to the wealthy, indicating that the future famine will have its greatest impact on the poor. It's equally possible that this statement simply emphasizes the severity of the famine without contrast to the rationing of wheat and barley—even the olive oil and wine must be treated with great care. Either way, this famine will be severe and many people will suffer greatly.

**The fourth Seal Judgment—the Lord Jesus Christ will justly
judge the world by releasing massive death on the earth (6:7-8).**

Political domination, global warfare, and severe famine will result in a massive death toll. The fourth Seal Judgment unleashes death in an unprecedented way.

The Lamb, Jesus Christ, broke open the fourth seal (6:7).

Once again the Lamb, Jesus Christ, breaks open a seal on the scroll of judgment. The fourth living being again invites John to “Come and see!” With so much judgment already revealed in the first four Seal Judgments we can’t help but wonder whether or not John shuddered to see yet more pain and suffering. But the end was just beginning!

A deathly pale horse emerged carrying a rider personifying massive death (6:8).

The fourth horse that leaped from the scroll was a “pale” horse, literally yellowish-green, the color of a decaying corpse. The rider on this deathly pale horse is named “Death.” Unlike the other three horsemen, this one has a companion. Following along with Death is Hades. Hades refers literally to the unseen world and refers specifically to the dire destiny of those who die without receiving the redemptive grace of Jesus Christ. The Lord in His sovereignty authorizes Death and Hades to kill one-fourth of the earth’s population. In other words, billions of people will die. Death will come by way of the sword (global warfare) and famine as already revealed in these first four Seal Judgments. In addition there will be death by means of death itself, probably referring to disease and plagues. Finally, wild beasts will take the lives of many. Even animals will be affected by the famine and will turn on human beings. Similarly, Ezekiel 14:21 names four deadly judgments that occurred in Israel’s past—sword, famine, wild beasts, and plague. These same judgments will fall on the earth in the future but with much greater scope and devastation.

The earth will reel from the first four Seal Judgments, the four horsemen of the apocalypse. Yet these judgments, and the many more judgments to follow, are the just judgments of a holy God on a rebellious world. The Second Coming of Jesus Christ will eventually unseat all human resistance to His righteous rule, but first judgment will prepare the way. When we read about these horrible judgments that must necessarily fall on the earth we’re reminded that Jesus looks at sin differently than we do and He extends grace more readily than we deserve.