

REVELATION

Part 12: “The Unveiling of Time”

Revelation 6:1—7:3

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Summary

Delve into the mystical imagery of Revelation with Pastor David A. Ritchie as he explores the timeless truths of Revelation 6:1—7:3. In this sermon, we will explore the symbolism of the four horsemen, the cry of the martyrs, and the great day of wrath through vivid illustrations and profound insights. Discover how these ancient visions illuminate our understanding of history, justice, and the hope found in Christ's victory over darkness.

Scripture Reading

Good morning, church family! For all the mothers in the room, I sincerely wish you all a very Happy Mother’s Day. And on what I assure you is an entirely unrelated note, today, we will discuss the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

Our Scripture reading comes from Revelation, chapter 6, beginning verse 1, in which the Apostle John writes:

“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!” 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. When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” 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. 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. 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!” When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” 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” (Revelation 6:1–8, ESV).

This is God’s word. Thanks be to God. Let’s pray.

Almighty and everlasting God, thank you for the gift of your revealed word. Even when your words are mysterious and even terrifying, we thank you that you speak to us and that through the illuminating power of your word, we can see what is true in a world of illusions. So, I pray that today, by the power of your Spirit, you would help us see what you see.

Also, on this day, we truly thank you for the gift of mothers. Thank you for every mother in this congregation. Thank you for the ways that kind and loving mothers reflect the care, nurture, and kindness you have for your people. We also pray for those who have lost mothers, mothers who have lost children, those who are not able to have children, and those who may be estranged from their child or parent. May you grant them the comfort and peace that only you can give.

For us all, may your word nourish us where we are hungry, heal us where we are wounded, and give hope where there is sorrow. We pray this in the mighty name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.

Introduction

Today, we are returning to our journey through the New Testament book of Revelation. To catch us up to speed, the apostle John has been caught up into an immersive vision of heaven, where he witnesses a glorious throne. He also beholds the Lord God Almighty, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, who is seated on the throne and rules all of creation.

And in the hand of the One seated on the throne, John sees a scroll. The scroll represents the mystery of all of history and time. It contains the truth and wisdom of God's self-revelation and God's plan of redemption.

However, the scroll is sealed and shut with seven seals, and no one in heaven or on earth is worthy to open the scroll and reveal its mysteries. But then, the lamb who was slain steps forth.

The lamb is an apocalyptic vision of Jesus Christ. He is the sinless one who took upon himself the sins of the world at the cross and overcame the power of death. He is at once perfectly God, and he is perfectly man.

It is only through Jesus that we can understand the mystery of existence, the meaning of history, and glory of redemption. It is only through the lamb that was slain that the scroll will be unsealed.

As we will see today, each of the seven seals unlocks a new vision laden with spiritual meaning and significance. We will discover that the unsealed scroll tells the story of a creation fractured by sin but destined for rescue and redemption.

So, for the rest of our time today, we are going to unpack all of Revelation chapter six and the first few verses of Revelation 7. And we'll organize thoughts into three main

sections: 1.) *The Four Horsemen*, 2.) *The Souls of the Slain*, and 3.) *The Great Day of His Wrath*.

Exposition

1.) *The Four Horsemen*

The phrase “four horsemen of the apocalypse” is one of those phrases that has trickled down out of the Bible, out of the church, and into popular culture. Typically, the four horsemen of the apocalypse are viewed as harbingers of the end of days.

But I think it is important to take a moment, pause, and remember what the word “apocalypse” actually means. When we hear the word “apocalypse,” we think about hyper-specific prophecies about to the end of the world. But the word “apocalypse” does not mean the end of the world. The word “apocalypse” means “*unveiling*.” An apocalypse is when God lifts the curtain that lies over our physical world so that we can see transcendent and spiritual realities at the heart of our existence.

So, when we see the surreal visions and images in apocalyptic literature, these are not meant to give us a direct forecast of the future. No, the visions of Revelation are meant to unveil and uncover the hidden spiritual truth about our reality. In this way, Revelation helps us know more than just the future; Revelation helps us understand God’s perspective about our past, our present, *and* our future.

So, with that framework of apocalypse in mind, you need to know that there are wrong and unhelpful ways to approach and understand a passage like Revelation 6. I think it is very unhelpful to try and make direct connections with each horseman and specific individuals in history. But many have tried to do so.

People have speculated that the rider of the white horse is Atilla the Hun or Genghis Khan. Lots of ink has been spilt one why either Napoleon or Hitler is the rider on the red horse. During the Cold War, many people in the western world saw the Joseph Stalin or Mao Ze Dong as the rider on the black horse, and more recently people have suggested that Bill Gates or Anthony Fauci as the true identity of the fourth horsemen.

Now, you might find such takes on Revelation interesting or engaging. But they all miss the mark.

No, these visions of the four horsemen would have meant just as much to the original first-century Christian readers of Revelation as they mean to us, for they represent timeless truths. Thus, the four horsemen are not specific figures from history—*they are history*. They have ridden through, rampaged, and “patrolled” the earth ever since man’s first disobedience.¹ They represent the long history of conquest, bloodshed, famine, and death that have stained our God’s creation ever since sin first entered the world.

¹ Note the Old Testament background for these riders is Zech 1:5–18; 6:1 –8.

This vision was memorably depicted by the American painter Benjamin West in his massive painting titled *Death on a Pale Horse* [show [2Death on a Pale Horse \(3rd Version\) by Benjamin West \(1817\)](#)]. The four horsemen of Revelation 6 seemed to have fascinated Benjamin West, and, as a result, he created three separate versions over the course of three decades of this one biblical scene. The version we are looking at today is the third and final version, painted as West neared the end of his own life and found himself face-to-face with the inescapable power of death.

It is a haunting vision of the haunting story of human history in which the artist is seeking to capture and display how powerless and pathetic we humans are against the forces we cannot control in our broken world.

When we look closer to the right of the painting, we see the first three horsemen described in Revelation 6 grouped together [show [3Detail of the First three Horsemen](#)]. The first is the rider on the white horse, who wears a golden crown and is armed with a bow so that he may go forth “conquering, and to conquer.”

Interestingly, this first rider looks like a version of Christ with a haloed head and a golden crown. And indeed, some scholars associate this rider of the white horse with Christ because later in Revelation, Christ returns to his creation riding a white horse in victory.² However, the surrounding context of the passage, the other riders clearly portray all four horsemen as powers of darkness who inflict suffering upon creation. In this way, this first horseman of the apocalypse is every king, every dictator, every president, and prime minister who has pretended to be a savior and messiah so that he can acquire power, conquer, and crush all who would oppose him. Thus, this first rider is not Christ, he is every political figure in the history of the world who is a pathetic parody of Christ. He is every Caesar, every king, every politician who claims that he can save you as long as you give him power.

Just behind the white horse is the rider of the red horse. He has been given a great sword, and with that sword, unleashes bloodshed and violence and warfare on the earth. He has the power not only to shed blood but also the power to seduce others toward cruel cycles of vengeance and bloodlust. This rider is still riding through the streets of Ukraine and Gaza and in the forest jungles of Myanmar and central Africa.

Further in the background is the rider of the black horse, who holds weighing scales in his hand, which symbolize both trade and justice. But it becomes apparent that this rider represents famine and economic injustice. As he appears, a voice says, “*A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!*” (Rev 6:6). This is a statement basically means that it costs an entire day’s wage for a bag of dry flour. In such conditions, the working poor cannot possibly survive but instead starve to death, while the wealthy have more than enough wine and oil to feast upon and indulge every appetite.

² Both Hendriksen and Peterson adopt the view of Christ as the rider on the white horse in Rev 6. Beale, however, offers a convincing rebuttal of this view.

Even now, the rider of the black horse rides through the earth. Even in our scientifically advanced era, we live in a moment when over 50% of the world's wealth is held by the top 1%. Many of the world's poor are crushed by cycles and systems that perpetuate weakness and poverty. The wealthiest in the world have all they need yet they often use the power of their vast well will lobby their governments to give them more and more.

And finally, we see the central and final figure of the four horsemen—Death on his pale horse [show [4Death of Death on a Pale Horse](#)]. Behind Death is Hades, the pagan god of death and the underworld. In Benjamin West's painting, just behind Death and Hades are also the shadowy figures of the beasts and the dragon, who we will meet later in the book of Revelation. In many ways, Death on his pale horse symbolizes the culmination of all the riders that have gone before. Whether by sword or sickness or famine or beasts, the power of Death ravages God's good creation. Indeed, those beneath the stampede of Death's horse are crushed beneath his power. Those who are oppressed by Death have no recourse and no capacity to resist his tyranny.

Taken altogether, this is a horrifying vision. But we must not look away from the horror.

Here, the word of God is calling us to have unveiled eyes to see the horsemen and know that *this* is what sin does to the world. *This* is what our little compromises and white lies unleash upon creation. *This* is what our greed and indulgences do in the long term. *These* are the beasts that are awakened when we try to build our little kingdoms and allow hatred and bitterness to reign in our hearts. Our sins coalesce into monstrous powers that we cannot control and cannot withstand in our own strength.

The power of Death still reigns undefeated—with one significant exception. For the lamb who was slain possesses a power that is greater than the powers of darkness. The power of resurrection will one day forever destroy the power of Death. And there is a day coming when Christ will bring justice for those who have suffered under the tyranny of the powers of darkness. This leads us to our second point.

2.) The Souls of the Slain

Ever since the powers of since came into this world, the innocent have suffered oppression, abuse, and injustice. Even as the Apostle John is writing the book of Revelation, he is suffering exile on a forgotten and forsaken island because of his testimony to the gospel message. He has watched over the last years of his life as his best friends and even his own brother were murdered and martyred for their faith in Jesus. John is a man who would have known all about suffering. He would have personally felt the sting of injustice.

Here, I think it is important to remember that we live in a unique social situation during which we can openly worship and follow Jesus without the threat of physical violence or retribution. But for much of history, this has not been the case. In fact, the vast majority of the Bible was written by people and to a people who personally knew what it meant to be oppressed and suffer under unjust power. This is why so many of the Psalms contain

the refrain, “*O Lord, how long?....How long will you allow my enemy to exalt over me?*” (see: Ps 13).

But when the fifth seal is unsealed, it shows a vision that reveals that God does indeed see the suffering of his people. He sees the injustice they have endured. And he wants us to know that there is a day coming when those who have seemingly gotten away with it will be held to account.

The passage reads: *“When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been”* (Rev 6:9–11).

I think when we experience unjust sorrow and pain, it is easy to fall into the temptation of believing that God does not see our pain. Yet, since the dawn of creation, the blood of those who were murdered and slain has cried out to God (see: Gen 4:10), and God has heard that cry.

Yet, when the innocent suffer every day at the hands of the cruel, and when God’s people are abused for their faith, it is all too natural for us to wonder whether or not God has an answer to the problem of pain.

But God has given us more than just an answer. He has given us his Son. Again, it is the lamb who was slain that unseals the scroll.

Because of the cross, the empty grave, and the promise of Christ’s return, we can know that suffering will endure as long as this sin-fractured world endures. But our suffering does will not last forever. There is an endpoint. There is a day coming when all tears will be wiped away.

This is why the souls of the slain are told to wait; to rest a little longer. Even while evil endures, God is calling his people to bear forth the spiritual fruit of patience.

But patience is a fruit that is impossible to bear without the virtue of hope. We are to endure our sorrow and suffering, knowing that the trials that beset us are not without purpose. While God is not the author of the evil we experience in this sin-fractured world, he is powerful enough to redeem the suffering and sorrow we experience to our good and his glory.

This is why those who have suffered at the hands of evil are given “white robes” while they wait. These robes, I believe, are a visual symbol for the theological concept of sanctification. Sanctification is the process of participating in the life of God through which the Holy Spirit progressively forms and shapes us to look more and more like

Christ. And Scripture tells us this process of sanctification often happens not despite our suffering but *because* of it.

This is why the Apostle James tells us to, *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing”* (James 1:2–4).

This is why Paul tells us that we should, *“...we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope”* (Rom 5:3–4).

And as Mack so beautifully reminded us last week from the words of the Apostle Paul, *“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison”* (2 Cor 4:17).

So yes, the powers of conquest and violence and famine and death ravage our world with injustice and pain. And yes, the innocent will suffer, and we will suffer.

But we are to suffer with hope. We are to suffer with endurance. And we are to wait, knowing that our waiting is not wasted. For God is forming us more and into the image of his Son. And he who has begun this good work in us will be faithful to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:6). This leads us to our third and final point.

3.) The Great Day of His Wrath

One of the mega-themes throughout the book of Revelation is God’s promise that a day is coming when all the evil of this world will be held to account. The Old Testament prophets called this day “The Day of the Lord.” But here in Revelation 6, it is the day of the lamb and the great day of his wrath.

The opening of the sixth seal unlocks a vision of a massive cataclysm. Imagine the great and sudden disasters of history: the volcanic eruption of Vesuvius that buried the cities of Pompei and Herculaneum, the nuclear bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the massive death toll of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. As terrifying as those events were, even those events can’t be compared to the day of God’s judgment and wrath.

Our text reads: *“When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the*

throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (Rev 6:12–17).

John describes a calamity so severe and surreal that it stretches beyond what most of us are able to imagine. But there was a British painter named John Martin who attempted to visualize the words of the sixth seal. In the mid-1800s he painted a work known as *The Great Day of His Wrath* [show [The Great Day of His Wrath by John Martin \(1851-1853\)](#)].

Here Martin depicts an earthquake so severe that the planet seems to break in half. True to the words of the Apostle John, the sun is turned into black darkness, and the moon is blood red. Stars fall from the heavens, and the sky is torn open. Mountains are toppling upside down in and upon themselves, tumbling like the waves of the ocean.

But if you look closely, you can see at the crest of this wave, there are cities atop what used to be high mountains. If you look even closer to the bottom of the painting, you can see people below who are crying out for the mountains and rocks to fall on them and consume them.

But why are they hiding? They are hiding for all the sins of the world have at last been exposed. And as our first parents hid their exposure behind fig leaves, all those who have joined themselves to the powers of death and darkness will one day seek to hide exposure. But even the mountains will not hide them from the justice of God.

Whether kings or servants, rich or powerful, no matter how strong or wealthy or impressive someone might be, the righteous judgment of God is all-encompassing. This is a vision of final and ultimate judgment.

Now you might hear that and say, “Wait! How could this be the final judgment? We are not even a third of the way through this book yet!” This is why it is important to remember Revelation is not linear or chronological. In fact, before we are through, we will witness visions of the final judgment multiple times, from multiple different angles, in the same way you might see a sports play in slow motion from multiple camera angles.

But while it is tempting to see such a vision of God’s judgment as a vision of horror, we must also see it as a vision of hope.

Again, this is a promise that, one day, the powers of evil will be held to account. A day is coming when this broken world will be unmade so that all things will be made new.

Conclusion

The unsealing of the scroll is a supernatural vision of history. It is the unveiling of time itself. And yes, it is awesome and terrifying. And yes, it should fill us with a righteous fear of the Lord. But we should not fear our future.

For even in the great day of his wrath, there will be no wrath for those who have faith in Christ. For there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ (Rom 8:1).

For the wrath we once deserved was poured out upon Christ at the cross, and for those who trust in him, we have been sealed by God. That's why chapter 7 of Revelation begins with these encouraging words, "After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, 'Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads'" (Rev 7:1–3).

If you are a student of the Bible, you may recall there was another significant moment in Scripture during which people were spared of horrific judgment because they were marked, sealed, and set apart as God's people.

During the tenth plague of the Exodus, the Angel of Death took the life of all the firstborn children in the land of Egypt. The only way that the life of the firstborn was spared was if the house that the firstborn child belonged to was marked. And can you remember what the sign of that mark was?

It was the blood of the lamb that had been slain.

So too, we can rest knowing that we have been marked by the blood of the lamb. For if you have placed your hope and trust in Jesus Christ—his perfect life, his substitutionary death, his victorious resurrection—you are no longer subject to the wrath of God's righteous judgment. For those who are in Christ, Christ has already endured your judgment [show [5The Great Day of His Wrath by John Martin \(1851-1853\)](#)].

And I think that gives us a new way to look at John Martin's *The Great Day of His Wrath*. It is not just a picture of God's righteous wrath poured out on the day of judgment. It is a picture of what was poured out on Christ at the cross. It is a faint glimpse of what Christ endured so that we might live.

So, the meaning of the unsealed scroll is not whether or not can you decode the mystery or know the special the play-by-play knowledge of the future so you can say I told you so.

The meaning of the unsealed scroll is an invitation to see the unveiling of time and the story of history from God's perspective.

So, every time you witness conquest, war, famine, and death, learn to discern the horsemen riding. Every time you witness the persecution of the weak at the hands of the powerful, listen for the cry of the souls beneath the altar of heaven. Every time you witness the brokenness of creation, remember and rest in the promise that God will

right every wrong with overwhelming power and terrifying just. And in the midst of it all, may we live in the confident faith of those who are marked and sealed by our God with the blood of the lamb.

For the lamb is the only one who is more powerful than the powers of darkness. He is the one who has promised our justice. He is the one who will make all things new.

So, as we await the day of his return, may we delight in his will and walk in his ways to the glory of his name.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. Read all of Revelation 6:1–7:3 out loud, and try to briefly summarize the visions that are seen in this section of Scripture.
2. How can we recognize the “horsemen” described in Revelation 6:1–8 in our daily lives?
3. In Revelation 6:9–11, we see the souls of the martyrs crying out for justice. How can we, as a church community, support and advocate for those who are persecuted for their faith around the world today? What actions can we take to stand in solidarity with the oppressed?
4. The imagery of the sixth seal in Revelation 6:12–17 depicts a day of reckoning and judgment. How does this vision impact our understanding of accountability and responsibility as followers of Christ? What are practical ways we can live in alignment with God's righteousness and justice in anticipation of this day?
5. Revelation 7:1–3 speaks of God's sealing of his servants as a sign of protection and preservation. How does this concept of being sealed by God's grace and marked as his own impact our daily lives? How can we live confidently in the assurance of God's faithfulness and protection, even in the midst of trials and tribulations?